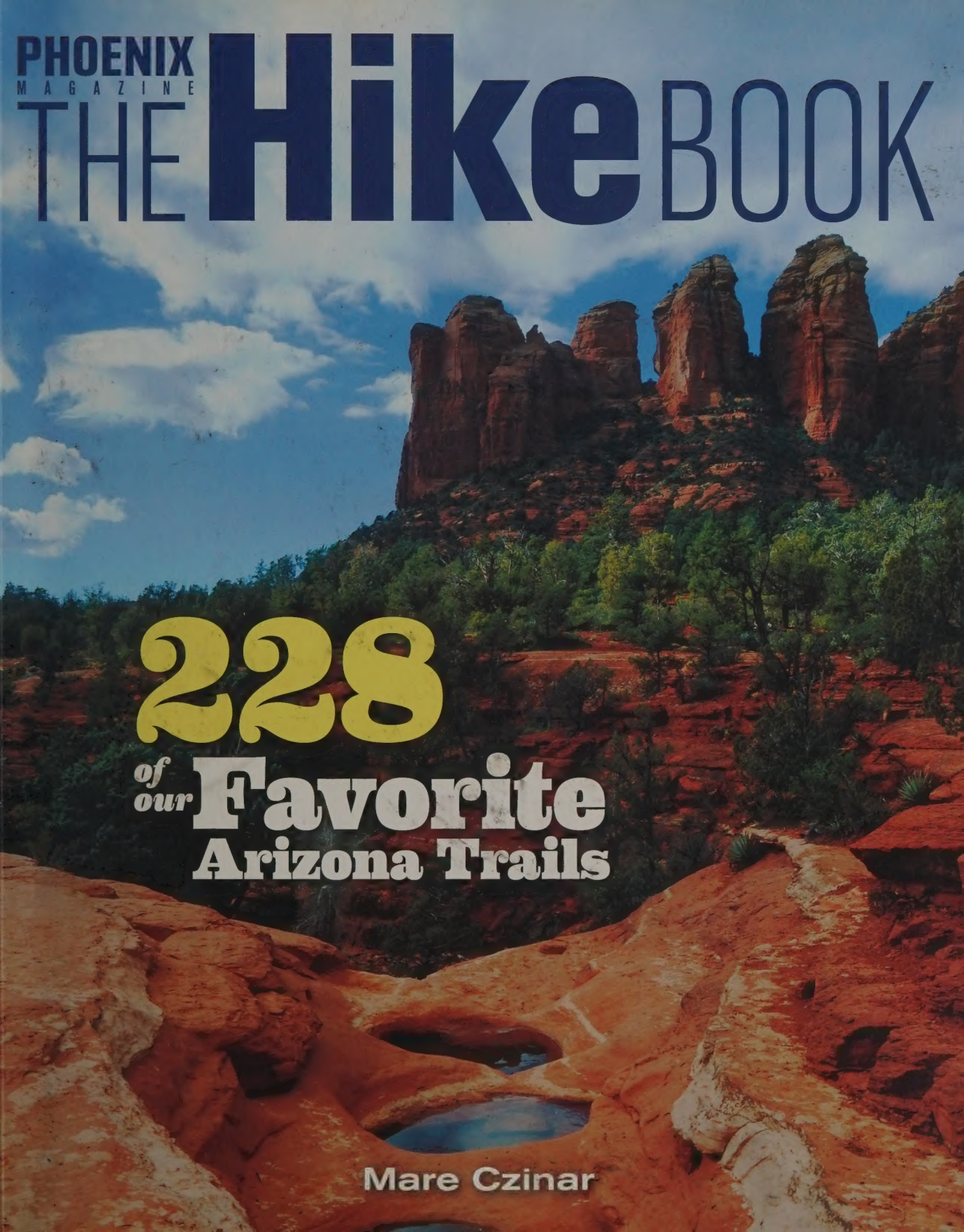
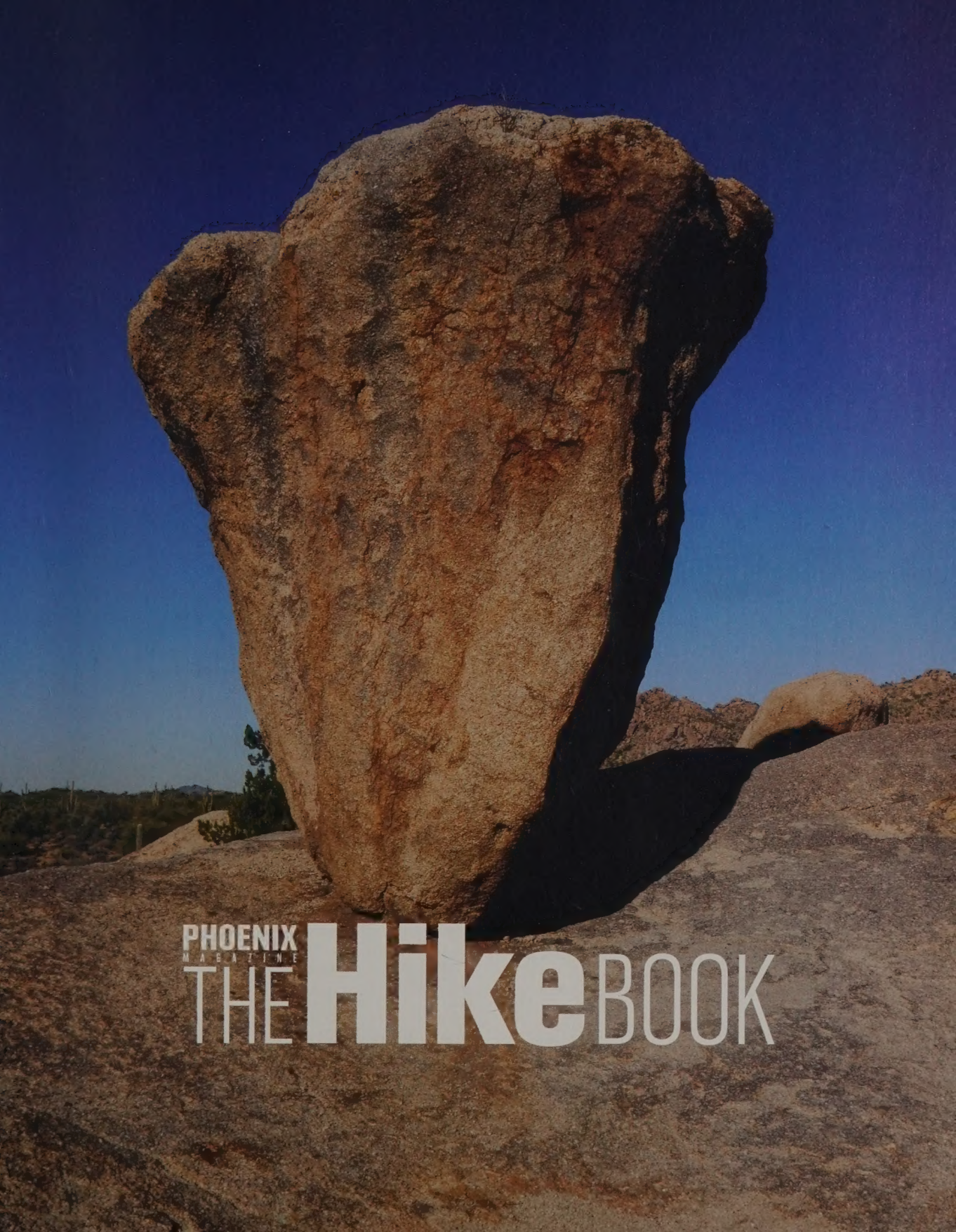
PHOENIX MAGAZINE

THE Hike BOOK



228 of our Favorite Arizona Trails

Mare Czinar


PHOENIX
MAGAZINE
THE Hike BOOK

PHOENIX THE HIKE BOOK

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This book was produced by the creative team of *PHOENIX* magazine. For more than 50 years, *PHOENIX* magazine's experienced writers, editors, and designers have captured all aspects of the Valley with award-winning and insightful writing and design. Our features, narratives, profiles, and investigative reporting keep our 385,000 readers in touch with the Valley's latest trends, events, personalities and places.

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Why hike?

BEYOND THE OBVIOUS PHYSICAL HEALTH BENEFITS, hikers hit the trails for myriad reasons.

A recent poll of a large Arizona social media hiking group revealed some insights about why hikers hike:

■ "Hiking clears my mind." ■ "It's relaxing." ■ "Being on a trail relieves my stress." ■ "I like to capture great photos." ■ "To get away from people." ■ "To lose myself in nature." ■ "It helps relieve anxiety." ■ "Hiking builds my self-confidence." ■ "I feel free outdoors." ■ "Hiking is my church for spiritual enrichment." ■ "I hit the trails to heal from loss." ■ "I hike because I can. That wasn't always the case." ■ "I do it for the 'gram." ■ "Solitude." ■ "Seeking peace and quiet." ■ "To see what I was fighting for." (from a war veteran) ■ "To escape the madness." ■ "For quality time alone." ■ "Hiking costs less than therapy." ■ "It just feels good."

Read into these statements and a common theme emerges: Hiking is escapism.

Not so much in the run-and-hide denial kind of way, but as an opportunity to refresh in environments free from the chatter and clutch of urban living.

Hiking is sort of like eloping with your doubts and fears and returning with the fortitude to live with them.

The popularity and addictive quality of hiking should be no surprise. Humans are adventurers at heart. Wanderlust is in our DNA – we move about to adapt, to discover or to simply play. Hiking is an ideal way to venture into new environments, test your mettle and maybe push yourself to do something that's a little bit scary. And exhilarating.

We curated the hikes in this book in response to the sport's big draws: solitude, beauty and escape.

You won't find crowded trails within these pages. Frenetic favorites like Phoenix classics Camelback Mountain and Piestewa Peak, Devil's Bridge in Sedona, Humphreys Peak in Flagstaff and Fossil Springs near Pine-Strawberry get plenty of publicity and traffic – exactly the opposite of what our readers say they want.

Instead, we listened to Arizona hikers and teased out a collection of 228 trails that ditch the crowds and offer alternative perspectives.

None of the hikes is "secret" or difficult to find. Mostly, they exist in plain sight near hyper-popular trails and get overlooked because of adjacent big-name magnetism. Page through these under-appreciated gems, reset and go.

Whether mundane or mystical, the reasons hikers give for why they do what they do are deeply personal, varied and always inspiring.

Hiking could be a life-changer, a soul-cleansing journey or dusty-boot redemption.

But then again, maybe it's just walking with good scenery.

Mare Czinar

Mare Czinar is a lifelong hiker and longtime head of production at Cities West Media. Read more of her work at *arizonahiking.blogspot.com* and in *PHOENIX*'s Citizen Hiker column.

FOR MORE HIKING CONTENT, VISIT PHOENIXMAG.COM

The Top 10s

Cut to the chase with the author's favorite hikes by type.

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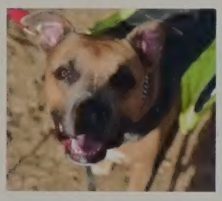

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Northern Arizona:
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Trail Rating Guide

● ***EASIEST***
Surface: Minimal elevation change on accessible, paved or hard footing.
Obstacles: None.

○ ***EASY***
Surface: Slight elevation change on minimally uneven footing.
Obstacles: 2 inches or less; rocks and ruts.

■ ***MODERATE***
Surface: Elevation change on uneven surfaces.
Obstacles: 8 inches or less; rocks and ruts.

◇ ***MODERATE/ DIFFICULT***
Surface: Elevation change on uneven footing.
Obstacles: 1 foot or less; loose rocks, ruts and possible drops.

◆ ***DIFFICULT***
Surface: Large elevation change on mostly uneven footing.
Obstacles: 1 foot or greater; loose rocks, ruts and drops.

◆◆ ***EXTREMELY DIFFICULT***
Surface: Maximum elevation change on extremely uneven footing.
Obstacles: 1 foot or greater; loose rocks, ruts, large drops and increased exposure to the elements.

Hike a weekend in

COCHISE COUNTY

FRIDAY

BENSON 12:30 PM

TOUR AND HIKE AT KARTCHNER CAVERNS

Enjoy the wonders of a living cave – named "Best Cave in the USA" by *USA Today* Readers Choice Awards. Marvel at the extraordinary formations, like "Kubla Khan," the largest cave column in Arizona. This tour is 1/2 mile in length and takes about 1.5 hours to complete. (520-586-4100) Then tackle the 4.2 mile Guidani Trail located to the east of the Whetstone Mountains. Elevations range from 4750' at the park trailhead to over 5620' at the highest point. The summits along the crest of the Whetstone Mountains are over 7000' in elevation. Vegetation is mesquite-invaded Chihuahuan semi-desert grassland at the lower elevations and open oak-juniper woodland on the higher slopes. (520-378-0311)

BENSON 5:00 PM

DINNER AT THE HISTORIC HORSESHOE CAFÉ

Since 1936, this quaint restaurant has greeted diners along Benson's main drag. Cowboy artist Vern Parker (1899-1978) created murals inside and out, and wooden posts showcase brands from ranches across southern Arizona. You will enjoy stories of mysterious shadows and voices inside the café, friendly service, and hearty meals. (520-586-2872)

SATURDAY

SIERRA VISTA 8:00 AM

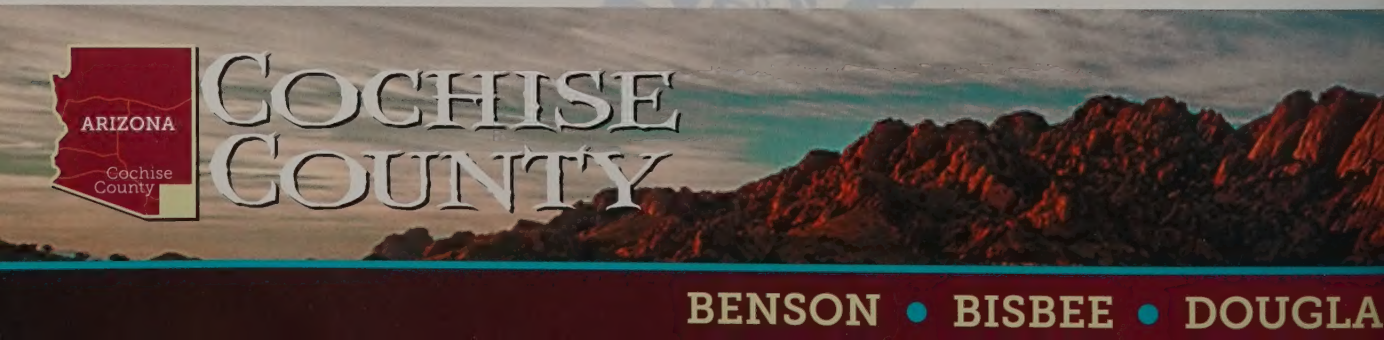
HIKE WORLD-RENOWNED NATURE CONSERVANCY RAMSEY CANYON PRESERVE

The Nature Conservancy's 280-acres is a haven for 170+ varieties of birds, including 14 species of hummingbirds. It's no wonder Sierra Vista is the "Hummingbird Capital of the United States"! The area's unique interplay of geology, biology, topography, and climate create a diverse habitat fo plant and animal life alike. Remember your camera – the views are glorious. (800-288-3861)

SIERRA VISTA 11:00 PM

LUNCH AT TANDEM UPSCALE DINING

This fine dining place is tucked off Highway 92, where patrons enjoy out-of-this-world meals that could compete with big-city dining—and at just half the price. The lunch menu offers scaled down versions of the dinners with still-huge flavors. Save room for dessert; the house-made treats are a slice of heaven! (520-378-4645)



BENSON • BISBEE • DOUGLA

BISBEE 1:30 PM
HIKE THE HERITAGE STAIRS

One of Bisbee's most magnificent, yet seldom heralded, architectural achievements are the countless concrete stairs that cling to steep canyon-sides. Bisbee has three miles, or 351 preserved sets of stairs.

BISBEE 3:30 PM
SHOPPING

Spend a couple hours touring fascinating Bisbee. Swing by the infamous Brewery Gulch, once home to dozens of saloons during Bisbee's mining heyday. Today, it buzzes with shops and galleries, and little pieces of art hidden between the houses.

DOUGLAS 6:00 PM
HOTEL GADSDEN & ENJOY A DINNER TOUR

Built in the early 1900s, the hotel's marble staircase, gold-leaf embellished ceilings, and 40-foot long Tiffany and Co. stained glass window – one of the only Southwest scenes the company ever created – will make your heart skip a beat. Legend holds that Mexican bandit-turned-revolutionary Pancho Villa once rode his horse up its marble steps. There is even a chipped stair to prove it! (520-364-4481)

SUNDAY

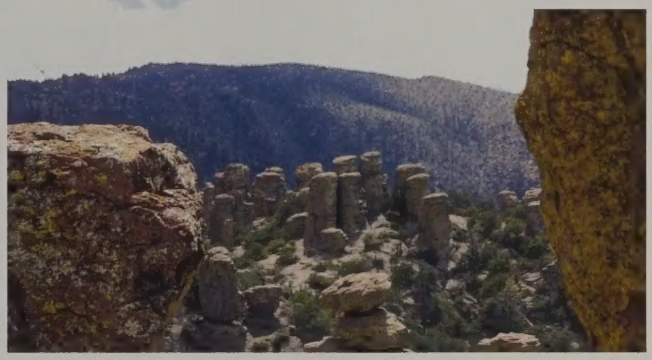
DOUGLAS 8:30 AM
TOUR AND HIKE SAN BERNARDINO NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The Black Draw Trail leads visitors through every habitat type found on the refuge. The 2.2-mile long trail includes wetlands, desert grassland, mesquite *bosque* (forest) and more. There is an observation deck on the overlook at the west mesa and interpretive panels at various locations along the trail.

The trail can be accessed at the main entrance gate or from Slaughter Ranch. The Refuge's amazing landscape and wildlife make it a favorite among nature photographers. (520-364-2104)

ON THE WAY TO WILLCOX 1:30 PM
CHIRICAHUA NATIONAL MONUMENT

Pack a lunch, a "Wonderland of Rocks" is waiting for you to explore. An 8-mile paved scenic drive and 17-miles of day-use hiking trails provide opportunities to discover birds and wildlife of this 11,985 acre secret treasure. You will be surprised by the amazing balanced rocks and pinnacles that make this place so unique. (520-824-3421)

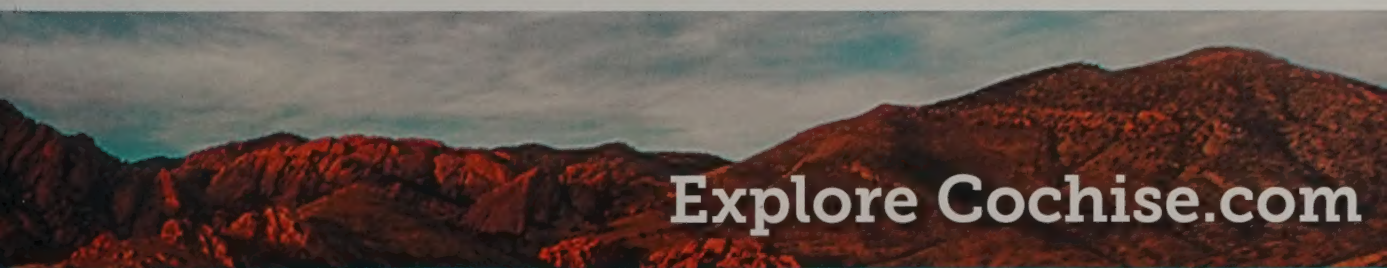


WILLCOX 3:00 PM
WINE TASTING ALONG RAILROAD AVENUE

Willcox produces 75 percent of Arizona's wine grapes! It is also the source of the most highly rated Arizona wines by *Wine Spectator.* You can bet there's plenty of great wine to taste, especially with 11 wine tasting rooms in the Willcox area, and 6 of them right near Railroad Avenue. Grab a glass and take a sip of something special.

WILLCOX 5:30 PM
DINNER AT LA UNICA

Prepare your taste buds for an authentic Mexican dining experience, tucked next to a bona fide tortilleria. Enjoy a beautiful buffet lunch on the open patio with great prices and flavorful food. (520-348-0100)



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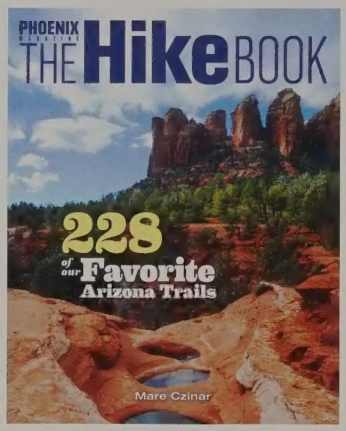

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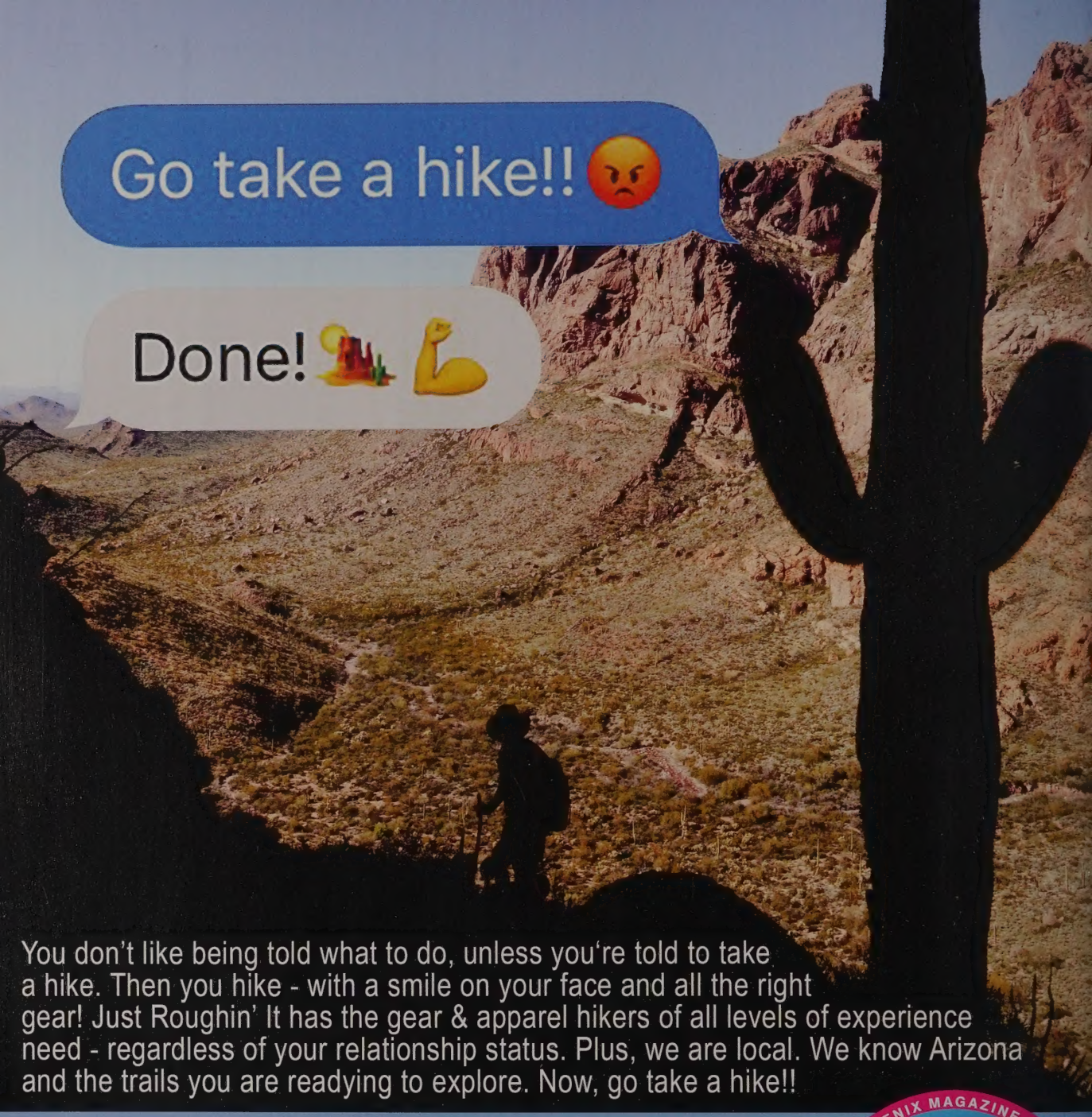

You don't like being told what to do, unless you're told to take a hike. Then you hike - with a smile on your face and all the right gear! Just Roughin' It has the gear & apparel hikers of all levels of experience need - regardless of your relationship status. Plus, we are local. We know Arizona and the trails you are readying to explore. Now, go take a hike!!

Just Roughin' It

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PHOENIX MAGAZINE 2019 Best of the Valley

METRO PHOENIX

Phoenix

Mesa

Cave Creek

Ahwatukee

Scottsdale

Tonto National Forest

Sonoran Desert Treks

Riparian Corridors

Creekside Trails

ANDREWS-KINSEY TRAIL

McDowell Sonoran Preserve

Opened in 2014, the Andrews-Kinsey Trail acts as a connector route between Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve and adjacent Fountain Hills McDowell Mountain Preserve. The trail pays tribute to the efforts of Chet Andrews and Roy Kinsey who have given more than 40 years of service to the McDowell Mountain Conservancy stewardship programs.

The 2-mile preserve section of the route runs along foothills overlooking a green valley bolstered by the distinctive profiles of Four Peaks, Mount Ord and Weavers Needle. At the top of each hour, the Fountain Hills geyser can be seen from the high ridges spewing one of the tallest water spouts in the world.

The mostly exposed trail begins across from a junction beneath Sunrise Peak. Rolling out in a curvy single track, it clings to the edge of cactus-cloaked slopes, rock escarpments and patches of cholla sprouting from clearings littered with glinting slabs of broken quartz. These beautiful specimens are just a tiny part of the complex geology of the surrounding terrain. Both the rocks underfoot and those visible on the horizon chronicle many cataclysmic chapters of earth's history.

During high hiking season (October-April), stewards occasionally offer guided geology hikes and talks that give insight into the volcanism, faulting and erosion that continues to shape this stretch of basin and range topography. For a primer, check out the resources available on the Arizona Geological Survey website.

LENGTH: 8.4 miles

RATING: moderate-difficult

ELEVATION: 1,923-2,962 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: water, water trough, horse trailer parking

GETTING THERE:

Sunrise Trailhead: 12101 N. 145th Way, Scottsdale

From Loop 101 in Scottsdale, exit onto Shea Boulevard. Go 5.8 miles east to 136th Street. Turn left, go 0.4 mile north to Via Linda, turn right. Continue 1.75 miles to the overflow/horse lot on the right or go to the 2-mile point/main trailhead on the left. Start on the Sunrise Trail and hike 2.2 miles to the Andrews-Kinsey junction. From here, the trail goes 2 miles to the Fountain Hills McDowell Mountain Preserve. Continue or return the way you came.

BADGER SPRINGS WASH

Agua Fria National Monument

Anybody who has traveled Interstate 17 between Phoenix and Prescott has inevitably sped past the Agua Fria National Monument. The placid rolling hills and boulder fields that are visible from the freeway belie a wilderness of wind-swept grasslands, deep canyons, extinct volcanic features and hundreds of historical resources. Proclaimed a national monument by President Bill Clinton in 2000, the 70,900-acre, Bureau of Land Management-supervised tract is rich in Native American cultural sites that date to between 1250 and 1450 A.D. One popular way to explore is to hike the Badger Springs Wash Trail.

Located a little more than a mile from the freeway, the mile-long trail follows a sandy drainage corridor that empties into the Agua Fria River. Just before trail's end, petroglyph panels on crags flanking the wash's east side bear dozens of etchings of animals, humans and artful designs. As with all archeological resources, please do not touch, alter or remove anything. The river's edge marks both the end of the official route and the beginning of a memorable backcountry adventure into a steep-walled gorge with numerous obstacles. Hiking beyond the confluence of the wash and the river is safe to do only when water levels are low. Do not attempt this hike during rain storms, as there is a high potential for deadly flooding. During very wet periods, the route may be impassible.

From the river-wash confluence, it's possible to follow the waterway in either direction, but the most dramatic scenery can be found when you head right (south). This bend in the river is flanked by the inky black basalt spewed by 4,042-foot Joe's Hill – a dormant shield volcano. The twisting course is a mix of soft sand, parched mud fields, acres of boulders, drop pools, rivulets and islands of cottonwoods. Running water continually changes the landscape, so you'll need to hunt through the quagmire. Be alert around puddles and sandbars because groundwater can create invisible sinkholes and spots of quicksand. Use a hiking stick to test ground stability.

Throughout the trek, rusty relics of mine operations rest crumpled in crevasses. Roughly 2 miles from the confluence, Perry Tank Canyon flows in from the east and, although not visible from the canyon floor, the ruins of Richinbar Mine sit on the lip of the canyon 700 feet above. Even though the hike to this point isn't very long, the irregular route and constant scrambling will tax your stamina more than you think.

LENGTH: 1 mile to the river

RATING: easy, then difficult

ELEVATION: 2,900-3,100 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restroom along access road

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, travel 40 miles north on Interstate 17 to the Badger Springs Road exit 256. Go 1 mile east to the trailhead. High-clearance vehicle recommended. Rough dirt and gravel road.

BALANCED ROCK TRAIL

McDowell Sonoran Preserve

MCDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY
See page 250.

Even in a terrain replete with natural sandblasted granite sculptures, Balanced Rock stands out. Located in the heart of the Brown's Ranch cluster of trails, this massive, mushroom-shaped behemoth stands tall and precariously exposed atop a weathered slab of igneous stone. Flanked by a complement of lesser boulders and a wind-tortured juniper, the hows and whys of the monolith's predicament are fodder for inquisitive minds.

The path to the rock is a short detour easily accessible via connecting trails. Although it is popular as a side trip off longer loop treks, the rock can be reached most directly by hiking 1.2 miles on Powerline Road to the Balanced Rock Trail junction. From here, it's 0.9 mile to the rock and 1.6 miles to trail's end. A map at the trailhead shows other hike combinations.

LENGTH: 5.6 miles round trip (or 4.2 to the rock and back)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 2,570-2,646 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

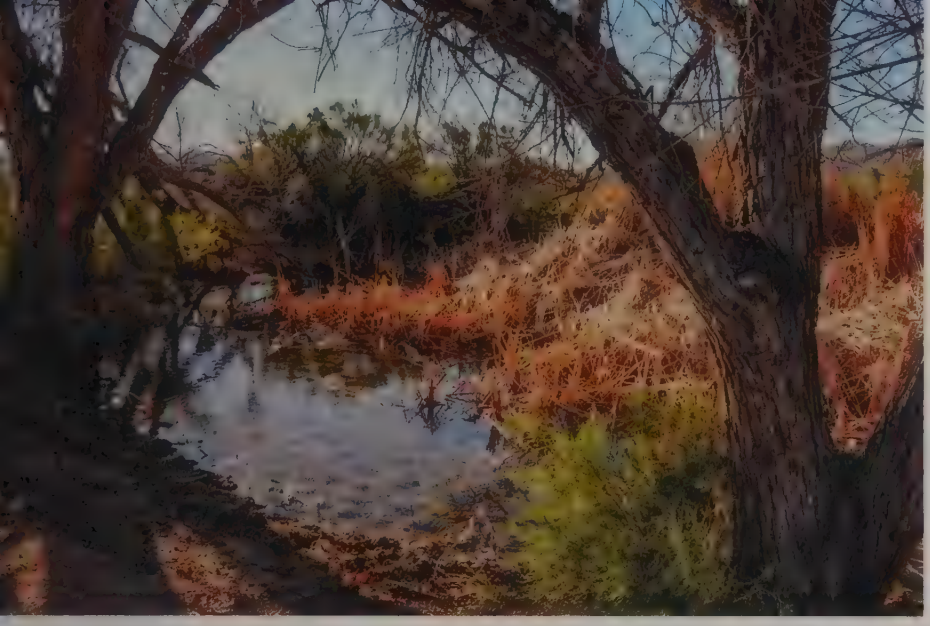
FACILITIES: restrooms, horse trailer parking

GETTING THERE:

Granite Mountain Trailhead: 31402 N. 136th St., Scottsdale

From Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Princess Drive/ Pima Road exit 36 and go 6.5 miles north on Pima Road to Dynamite Boulevard. Turn right, continue 5.9 miles to 136th Street, turn left. Go 1.8 miles to the trailhead on the left.

Chuparosa "Hummingbird Plant"
Blooms: Episodically year-round



BLACK CANYON TRAIL

Antelope Creek Segment

Nothing much has been going on in the town of Cordes since about the 1950s. Founded in 1883, the hamlet was once a busy stage stop on the Black Canyon Trail that served sheep herders, ranchers, mail wagons and weary voyagers traveling between Prescott and Phoenix. Completion of Interstate 17 in the 1970s put the nail in the coffin as the new freeway pulled traffic off the bumpy dirt roads and onto smooth pavement. Business shifted west, leaving behind a few hardy families to carry on the old Arizona lifestyle.

Today, the area is seen mostly by travelers braving the road trip to Crown King and hikers setting out to explore the old route, which has been repurposed into a recreational trail. The Black Canyon Trail Coalition beckons hikers to "Experience the Arizona Outback" by stepping out on all or part of the 80-mile Black Canyon Trail that stretches from North Phoenix to the town of Mayer.

The northern reaches of the trail especially live up to the "outback" label, and the Antelope Creek segment is a prime introduction to the canyon-riddled rangeland lodged between Agua Fria National Monument and Prescott National Forest.

Winding around the ranches and ruins of Cordes, the segment's signature features are its endless ups and downs, cliff-hugging turns, corrals and stock tanks supplemented with occasional cattle encounters.

To get a full dose of boots in the boondocks, try a 10-mile car shuttle hike. Begin at the Hidden Treasure Mine trailhead and hike north on the Antelope Creek segment. Most of the trail is well-signed, but there are a few head-scratcher junctions. At 3.4 miles, pass a gate (leave it as you found it), continue to the 3.8-mile point and turn left onto a Jeep road. An unsigned junction comes up at mile 4.1, where you'll veer right, hike 0.1 mile and pick up the signed single track on the right. At the 5-mile point, the trail crosses Crown King Road (1.2 miles south of Cordes) then connects with a Jeep route that overlooks Black Canyon with majestic views of the Bradshaw Mountains towering above the gaping chasm.

As the route transitions into the Drinking Snake segment (segments are not signed) you'll see Dripping Springs Canyon off to the left and a windmill just around a bend in the road. Beyond the windmill, the trail turns left past the corral and becomes a single track once again all the way to 9.4 miles, where you'll turn left onto a road, hike 0.2 mile, turn right at a junction and hike the last fraction of a mile to the Spring Valley trailhead.

LENGTH: 10 miles one way for car shuttle described here

Antelope Creek Segment: 5 miles one way

Drinking Snake Segment: 4.8 miles one way

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,656-4,192 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

ACCUMULATED ELEVATION GAIN: 2,713 feet

GETTING THERE:

Hidden Treasure Mine Trailhead (south):

From Interstate 17, take the Bloody Basin Road exit 259. Head left (west toward Crown King) on Bloody Basin (Crown King Road, Forest Road 259) and go 3.3 miles to the stop sign in the town of Cordes. Turn left onto Antelope Creek Road (County Road 179), go 2.7 miles and veer left at the Bumble Bee/Crown King fork. Continue 1.3 miles to a stop sign, turn left and make an immediate left into the parking area marked by a rusty water tank and corral. The trail begins by the corral. The dirt road is washboard-rough in spots with hairpin turns and drop-offs, but is passable by sedan.

Spring Valley Trailhead (north):

From Interstate 17, take the Bloody Basin Road exit 259, go 3.3 miles west (Crown King Road, Forest Road 259) to the ghost town of Cordes, turn right (north) onto Antelope Creek Road (County Road 74) and continue 3 miles to the trailhead on the left at Forest Road 9218A. Roads are sedan-friendly dirt/gravel.

BLACK CANYON TRAIL

Drinking Snake Segment

LENGTH: 4.8 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 3,932-4,220 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

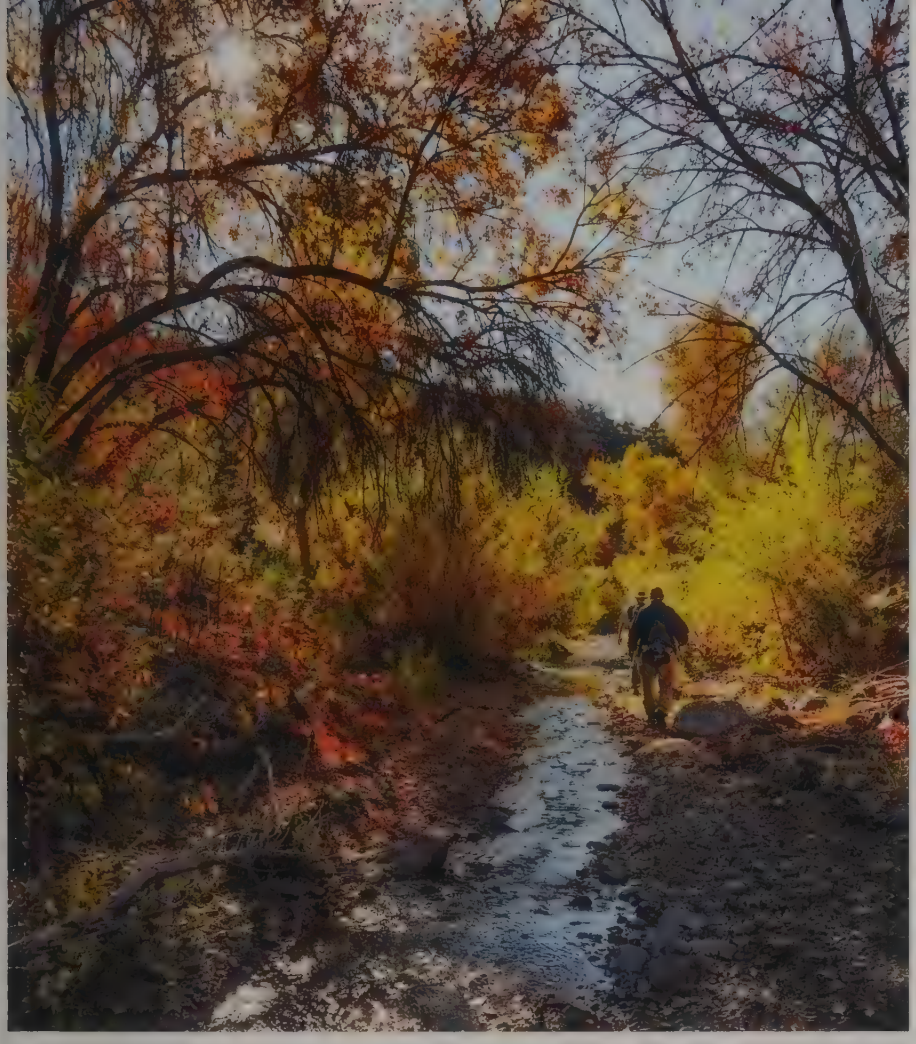
Spring Valley Trailhead:

From Interstate 17, take the Bloody Basin Road exit 259. Go 3.3 miles west (Crown King Road, Forest Road 259) to the ghost town of Cordes. Turn right (north) on Antelope Creek Road (County Road 74) and continue 3 miles to the trailhead on the left at Forest Road 9218A. Roads are sedan-friendly dirt/gravel.

Although the Drinking Snake segment of the Black Canyon Trail is as good a place as any to encounter reptiles, rare run-ins with species like gopher, king, garter and rattle are but minor distractions along this stunning backcountry route. The 4.8-mile stretch of the 80-mile trail that runs from Phoenix to Mayer cuts through foothills and grasslands fed by Big Bug and Antelope Creeks.

In addition to transient water, the creeks provide a rich habitat for the tasty critters snakes love. Mice, squirrels, lizards, rabbits, birds and other snakes are all on the menu. But, from a snake's perspective, anything that's not food (hikers, dogs, livestock) is a waste of venom. Trekkers who are aware of their surroundings and give serpents their space are in little danger. Additionally, the vipers are less active in cold weather, which is also the best time to hike this exposed route.

The hike begins with a walk on Forest Road 9218A, where you'll pass a gate and then turn left where the road splits at the 0.3-mile point. After another 0.3 mile, the trail becomes a single track and continues 2.4 miles to a scenic windmill and water tank above Dripping Spring Canyon. From here, you're back on a Jeep road for the final 1.8-mile haul to the Antelope Creek segment.



LENGTH: 8 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,640-3,200 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

North (Cave Creek Road) Trailhead:

From Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Princess Drive/Pima Road exit 36 and go 13 miles north on Pima to Cave Creek Road (aka Seven Springs Road/FR 24). Follow Cave Creek 6.5 miles to the gravel lot on the left just past the "Blue Wash No. 1" sign. Trail begins near the cottonwood trees across from the parking place.

South (Bartlett Dam Road) Trailhead:

From Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Princess/Pima exit 36 and go 13 miles north on Pima Road to Cave Creek Road (aka Seven Springs Road and FR 24). Follow Cave Creek Road 4.1 miles to Bartlett Dam Road, turn right and continue 2.8 miles to the trailhead on the left.

BLUE WASH-CAMP CREEK FALLS

Tonto National Forest, north of Carefree

The sandy, canyon-bound courses of Blue Wash and Camp Creek provide an interesting twist on desert hiking. During rainstorms, turbulent sheets of water pummeling off of the Cave Creek Mountains rush through these natural funnels that channel moisture into the Verde River. But, on most days, the rocky corridors are walkable mazes of boulders and rock jams settled in a soft-floored, multi-armed gorge that supports a community of willows, sycamores and bamboo plugged into precious groundwater.

There's no official trail, but well-worn footpaths ambling among blocks of granite as tall as houses are reasonably easy to pick out in this quiet section of Tonto National Forest between Cave Creek Road and Bartlett Dam Road. Motorized traffic is prohibited. From the Cave Creek Road trailhead, the hike begins with a passage through "Boulder Alley." Three tricky spots require some minor scrambling. At the 1.1-mile point, Blue Wash intersects with Camp Creek at a wide "T" junction. Turn left (northeast) here and hike 0.28 mile to visit Camp Creek Falls – a box canyon grotto with spring-fed water cascades and drop pools. Once done exploring the falls, return to the "T" and hike south down the wash another 3 miles to the turnaround point at Bartlett Dam Road. Actual mileage may vary slightly because there are multiple paths through the canyon.

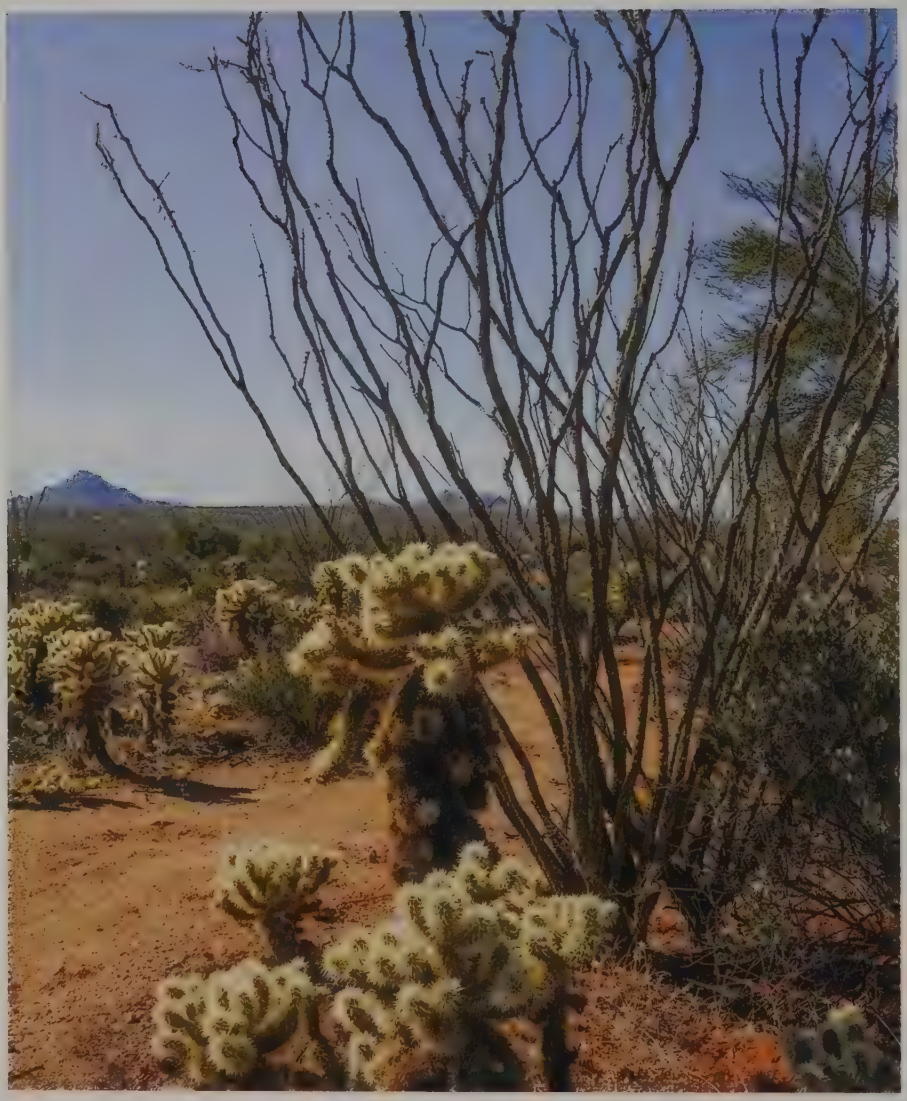
Desert Rock Pea
Blooms: February-May

BROWN'S RANCH-CHOLLA MOUNTAIN LOOP

McDowell Sonoran Preserve

MCDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY

See page 250.



Strewn with relics of an early 20th-century ranching operation, the flat, sandy acreage of North Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve is besieged by an arc of rough-edged peaks. The weathered rock mounds rise abruptly as sky-scrapers in molded cones and awkward heaps of mixed stone scattered like wayward gendarmes on a spent battlefield. Noteworthy among these peaks is Cholla Mountain. The trail boasts two scenic viewpoints and circles the north-south-running ridge. At the south end is The Amphitheater, a bend of beveled granite showcasing a feature presentation of Verde River Valley views. To the northeast, grottos within the impossible-to-miss stony bastion of Cathedral Rock frame saguaro-studded views of Sonoran Desert bluffs and basins.

Desert Christmas Cactus
Blooms: May-June (yellow-green)
Fruits: Winter

LENGTH: 7.7-mile loop (as described here)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,710-2,855 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms, water, water troughs, horse trailer parking

GETTING THERE:

Brown's Ranch Trailhead: 30301 N. Alma School Pkwy., Scottsdale

From Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Pima Road/Princess Drive exit 36, travel 6.5 miles north on Pima Road to Dynamite Road. Turn right, continue 2.7 miles to Alma School Parkway, turn left and drive 1 mile to the trailhead.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

Maps at the trailhead detail numerous hikes around Cholla Mountain. One scenic option:

Hike north on Brown's Ranch Road to the Corral Trail junction. Go right and hike to Dry Gulch Trail. Follow Dry Gulch to Cholla Mountain Loop Trail. Hike the loop and retrace your steps back to the parking lot.

BURSERA TRAIL

South Mountain Park, Phoenix

Twisted in organic, balletic form and smelling like perfume, Bursera microphylla – better known as the Elephant Tree – lives on the slopes of South Mountain Park. Brush up against one of these squat, red- and green-barked trees with swollen, contorted, pachyderm-like trunks and a pungent aroma of camphor will waft from its tiny leaves. The Elephant Tree is related to the plants that produce frankincense and myrrh, and its sap also can be dried and burned as incense. But don't rush out with a collection bucket – the trees are a protected species in Arizona.

To get an up-close look at this plant that grows only in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona and parts of southern California and northwestern Mexico, just follow the Bursera Trail, which was completed in 2011. The route is simple to follow and connects with both the National and Bajada Trails for those who want to add mileage to their hike. Also, because it's wide and not too steep, the route is very popular with mountain bikers. One bit of advice: Although the elevation change for the hike is only 653 feet, you'll do it twice for an out-and-back-hike.

LENGTH: 2.9 miles one way (6.68 miles round trip including access trail)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 1,235-1,888 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

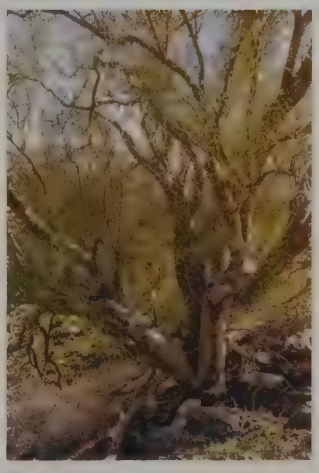
FACILITIES: none

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take Interstate 10 south/east (Tucson) to Pecos Road exit 161. Turn right and continue 7.2 miles to 17th Avenue. Turn right again and continue 0.7 mile to Chandler Boulevard. Turn left and go 0.3 mile to the trailhead.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

From the trailhead, begin by hiking west, making a sharp right about 0.1 mile in at a post for Pyramid Trail. Continue 0.44 mile to the junction with Bursera Trail, veer left and follow the signs.



Elephant Tree
Blooms: June-July

CASA GRANDE MOUNTAIN TRAILS

Casa Grande

Casa Grande Mountain Park resides in the desert space between a world of freeways, truck stops and valleys of checkerboard farmlands. Here, mornings break to the hum of traffic, blaring train horns and veils of mist drifting off of crops. Despite its proximity to the busy Interstate 10/8 interchange, the park has quality hiking, especially at its southern end, where the din of industry is absorbed by cholla-fleeced foothills and stony clefts.

The 1,025-acre park has more than 18 miles of non-motorized-vehicle-use trails. The system is made up of stacked loops with varying levels of difficulty, anchored by the 4.86-mile Ridge Trail that traces the mountain's eastern flank. While the Ridge Trail is well-signed, some of the others are not. Finding your way around isn't too tough, but because wildcat social trails also muddle the terrain, it's smart to download the park map before heading out. Official trails are marked by metal posts with arrows that use standard alpine color codes (black for difficult, blue for moderate, green for easy). Follow the posts to stay on track.

Two trailheads offer distinctly different experiences. At the north end, the Peart Trailhead appeals to those looking for easy, close-to-town hiking, while the Arica Trailhead provides access to the park's midsection and more difficult options.

While on the trail, scan the horizon for the profile of Picacho Peak and the jagged silhouette of the Sawtooth Mountains. Underfoot, look for the Arizona Fishhook Pincushion cactus that appears to grow out of solid rock in calf-high clusters. It blooms pink in the spring before producing cherry-red fruit that lingers through winter.

○ ◆

LENGTH: 18.29 miles

RATING: easy to difficult

ELEVATION: 1,500-2,350 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

Peart Trailhead:

From Interstate 10 in Casa Grande, take the Jimmie Kerr Boulevard exit 198 (State Route 84) and travel 2.6 miles west to Peart Road. Turn left (south) and continue 1.7 miles to where a "hiker" sign points to a dirt road on the left. Follow the sedan-friendly road 0.4 mile to the trailhead.

Arica Trailhead:

From Interstate 10 in Casa Grande, take the Sunland Gin Road exit 200 and head 0.1 mile south to Arica Road (just past the Love's travel stop). Turn right and continue 1.5 mile to the trailhead. The last half-mile is on rough dirt, but is passable by sedan.

MCDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY

See page 250.

COYOTE CANYON

McDowell Sonoran Preserve

One of the most interesting routes in the north section of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, Coyote Canyon Trail is already a hiker favorite because of its unique features.

In addition to see-forever views of the Cave Creek Mountains and Verde River Valley, the route has two signature attractions – a granite-walled slot canyon and a gloriously gnarled crested saguaro. Since this trail is deep in the heart of the preserve, the only way to get to it is to hike along connecting routes from the Granite Mountain trailhead.

Here's the most direct circuit: Follow the 136th Street Express 1.3 miles north and turn left onto the Dove Valley Trail. Hike 0.9 mile to the Coyote Canyon Trail junction, veer left and trek 1.3 miles to where it ends at the Granite Mountain Loop Trail. From here, there are many options for your return route (download the preserve map for details), but the shortest way back to the trailhead is to turn left and go 0.5 mile to the Cow Poke Trail, follow it 0.6 mile back to Dove Mountain Trail and return the way you came.

LENGTH: 6.2 miles (as described here)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 2,580-2,840 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms, horse trailer parking

GETTING THERE:

Granite Mountain Trailhead: 31402 N. 136th St., Scottsdale

From Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Princess Drive/ Pima Road exit 36 and go 6.5 miles north on Pima Road to Dynamite Boulevard/Rio Verde Drive. Turn right and continue 5.9 miles to 136th Street, turn left and go 1.8 miles to the trailhead on the left. Trailhead is open sunrise to sunset.

Bladder Sage
Blooms: Spring

ELEPHANT MOUNTAIN

Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area

Located just a few minutes north of Scottsdale, the rugged beauty of Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area is an island of pristine Sonoran desert surrounded by a sea of golf greens and adobe rooftops. The Elephant Mountain trail uses a maze of old Jeep tracks and primitive paths that cut through stream washes, grasslands and boulder fields that wander through some of the preserve's most remote and primitive areas.

The circuit departs from the trailhead along a volcanic ravine where obscured ancient ruins and rock art pepper the landscape. The park ranger conducts guided hikes to some of these precious heritage sites to educate the public about their significance and preserve the fragile artifacts. To sign up for interpretive hikes, visit the parks website.

About a mile into the hike, at the Tortuga-Elephant Mountain Trail junction, the distinct pachyderm profile of Elephant Mountain takes center stage. The trail

heads uphill to a saddle below the ersatz elephant's "tusks." The saddle, located at the 3.5-mile point, offers panoramic views of Sugarloaf Mountain, Skull Mesa and the McDowell Mountains. But that's not the best part – teetering atop the tusks are a series of ancient stone walls. Don't even think about scrambling up to explore them, because the area is off limits – except, of course, to ranger-led hikes.

◆

LENGTH: 9.2 miles out and back

RATING: difficult (route-finding skills required)

ELEVATION: 2,400-3,200 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: $3 daily fee per person. The self-pay station requires exact change.

FACILITIES: porta potties

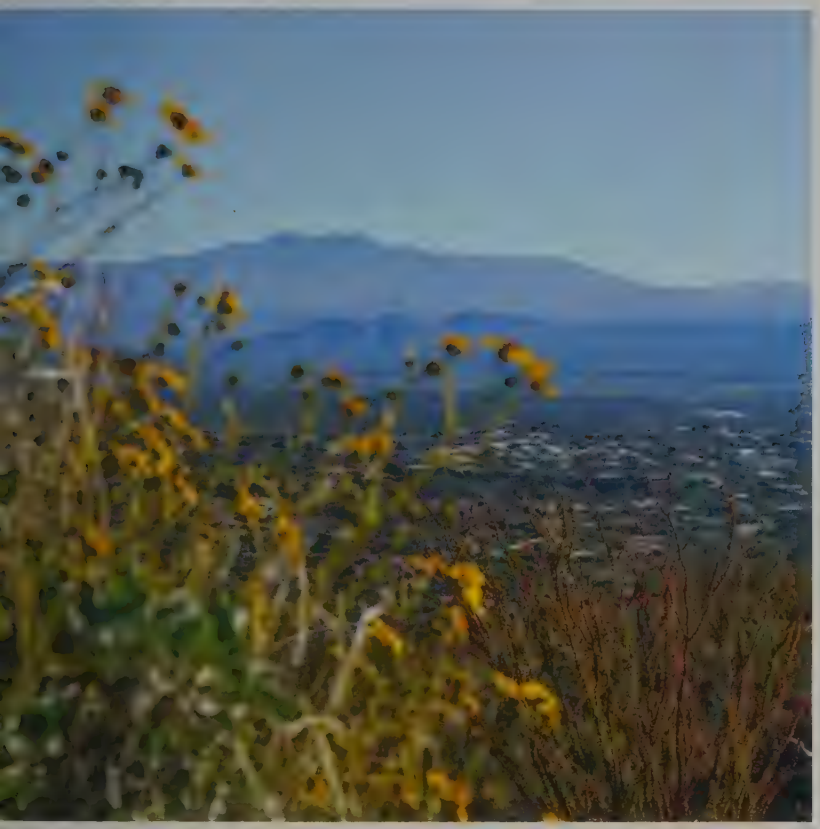
GETTING THERE:

From Loop 101 in North Phoenix, exit at Cave Creek Road and drive north for approximately 15 miles to Spur Cross Ranch Road. This is an easy-to-miss junction located just before the busy main drag of Cave Creek. It is signed, and the turnoff is on the left. From here, the road jogs north and then makes a tight turn to the right to another funny junction. There's a big sign here pointing north (go left) to Spur Cross Ranch. Continue north for 4.2 miles to the parking lot on the left. The last mile of the road is good dirt and passable by sedan.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

Follow the Tortuga Trail for 1.2 miles to the Elephant Mountain Trail junction. From there, the trail becomes primitive, marked only by rock cairns and faint footpaths.

FOUNTAIN HILLS McDOWELL MOUNTAIN PRESERVE



The Adero Canyon trailhead in the Fountain Hills McDowell Mountain Preserve officially opened on November 17, 2018. After decades of planning and construction, the roughly 1,000-acre preserve now occupies a mountainous sliver of space between manicured golf communities and the hiking hubs of Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve and McDowell Mountain Regional Park.

The mini but mighty preserve in the far northwest corner of town really packs a punch in terms of varied hiking opportunities. It has more than 11 miles of non-motorized trails that range in difficulty from very easy to extremely challenging. Perhaps the most tantalizing hiker gravy of the trail complex is its connectivity. Although most of the preserve's routes are contained within its borders, the Sonoran, Andrews-Kinsey and Dixie Mine trails cross into the adjacent park and preserve. These property-spanning paths offer seamless travel among popular northeast Valley hiking hubs. Each of the site's trails has its own character, but all capitalize on their advantageous location overlooking the Salt and Verde rivers' basin. Here, scenic vistas come in the form of low-hanging fruit and hard-won jewels. Ostensibly, the big jewels are gained by clambering up and over the extreme course of the Western Loop Trail, but a walkabout on the less arduous Promenade and Sonoran trails unpacks similar dramatic scenery.

Anderson's Thornbush
"Wolfberry"
Blooms: February-March, followed by oval, red-orange berries

From the trailhead, the Promenade Trail follows a wide, edge-hugging road on the preserve's eastern foothills. All trails in the preserve are well-signed and outfitted with location markers that correspond with maps available online and at the trailhead, so getting around is simple. As it swings around chunky bluffs, unobstructed views of the iconic Four Peaks and Superstition Wilderness soar above green valleys and sprawling suburbs.

At the 0.8-mile point, take either the Sonoran or Lower Sonoran Trail at location marker ST1/LST1. Both legs of the difficult-rated loop have some steep sections and loose rock where the path descends and rises through a craggy notch. Continue less than a mile to the crossover link at marker LST5 and swing back on the opposite leg. While hiking the loop, don't let the big mountain and valley panoramas dominate your experience. A veritable botanical garden of flowering plants tickle the fringes of the trails. Wolfberry shrubs, cholla, brittlebush and desert lavender drape over the route, adding pops of color to the heady hike.

LENGTH: 3.3 miles

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: 2,460-2,170 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: sunrise to sunset daily

FEE: MMRP, $2 per person

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

Adero Canyon Trailhead:
14800 N. Eagle Ridge Dr.,
Fountain Hills

From State Route 87 in Fountain Hills, go 3.2 miles west on Shea Boulevard to North Palisades Boulevard. Turn right. Go 1 mile to Eagle Ridge Drive. Turn left and go 2.3 miles to the trailhead.

Tree Tobacco
Blooms: February-March

GILBERT RIPARIAN PRESERVE at WATER RANCH

Town of Gilbert

Even with its proximity to U.S. 60 and a busy community center, a hike in this wetland complex of seven ponds and a fishing lake mimics a stroll in a wilderness marsh. The groundwater recharge basins are surrounded by verdant riparian vegetation that attracts thousands of shorebirds, making for a cool, shady hike, even in warm weather. Great blue herons, snowy egrets, long-billed dowitchers, mallards, grebes, killdeer, warblers and hummingbirds are easy to spot. Short loop trails with interpretive signs weave among flower gardens, mesquite bosques, nesting sites and feeding grounds. For hard-core birders, viewing blinds are set up along the shores. In addition to the hiking trails, the site features a kiddie playground with educational opportunities (dinosaur dig, anybody?), an observatory and a hefty events calendar.

LENGTH: 1.7 miles one way

RATING: easy, barrier-free

ELEVATION: 1,200 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, travel east on U.S. 60 to Greenfield Road. Go south on Greenfield to Guadalupe Road, hang a left and continue less than a block to the preserve parking areas on the right.

GOOSENECK TRAIL

McDowell Sonoran Preserve

MCDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY
See page 250.

It's fitting that this McDowell Sonoran Preserve connector route is named Gooseneck. Over its 7-mile length, it twists and bends in a dance through the desert that dodges among massive granite outcroppings with majestic views of Four Peaks, Superstition Wilderness and the Verde River Valley.

More than just a point-to-point journey, this route (which opened in 2014) runs from two major trailheads – Fraesfield in the north and Tom's Thumb to the south. It is also part of the Maricopa Trail that spans adjacent McDowell Mountain Regional Park and ties in with the Saguaro Nest (1.9 miles) and Redbird (1.1 miles) trails. Beginning the trek from the south involves hiking 0.3 mile on Marcus Landslide Trail and 0.2 mile on Rock Knob to the Gooseneck junction.

Immediately upon stepping out on this playfully snarled route, you'll see a botanical treasure trove of desert plants. You'll walk among gorgeous specimens of wolfberry shrubs, yucca, desert hackberry bushes and glowing clusters of jumping cholla. In spring, blooming wildflowers like red maids, filaree, lupines and poppies sprout from the loose gravel soils.

With big views, interesting geology and an understory of colorful blossoms, you'll be glad the trail sweeps out in lazy arcs that revel in the secret finds and secluded niches of this North Valley preserve.

Anderson's Thornbush "Wolfberry"
Blooms: February-March,
followed by oval, red-orange berries

LENGTH: 7 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 2,500-2,813 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: sunrise to sunset daily

FACILITIES: restrooms, horse trailer parking

GETTING THERE:

Parking is allowed only at the Fraesfield (3400 E. Rio Verde Dr., Scottsdale) and Tom's Thumb (23015 N. 128th St., Scottsdale) trailheads

HUMBOLDT MOUNTAIN

Tonto National Forest

Sometimes, all a hiker needs is a brainless hike up a hill with no route finding, treacherous terrain or precarious precipices. Just "up!" Humboldt Mountain meets this criteria, and it's not too far from Downtown Phoenix.

You've probably seen this hill and wondered about it – there's a huge white "golf ball" (as it's commonly called) on the summit that's visible from the back roads north of Cave Creek and Carefree. The white ball is a Federal Aviation Administration radar station for air traffic control and shares the summit with a fire tower and a hardware jungle of tech equipment.

LENGTH: 7.8 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 3,570-5,204 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Loop 101 in North Scottsdale, take the Pima Road/Princess Drive exit and go 13 miles north on Pima Road to Cave Creek Road. Turn right (east) and continue on Cave Creek Road (aka FR 24, Seven Springs Road) to Forest Road 562 (Humboldt Mountain Road) located between MCDOT mile markers 9 and 10. The turnoff is easy to miss. It's on the right and is paved. There's a "562" sign about 100 feet up the road. Park in the turnouts along FR 24 and FR 562 and hike up FR 562 to the summit. If you get to Seven Springs Recreation Area, you have gone roughly 2 miles too far.

The hike involves walking up a narrow road of crumbling asphalt via a series of gentle switchbacks and a combination of flat and fairly steep segments. The 2005 Cave Creek Complex Fire took a toll on the area's vegetation, but recovery is underway and desert shrubs are popping up everywhere. With every few feet of elevation gain, the views get bigger and better.

Much of the lower road winds through cactus-studded grasslands with Cave Creek Mountains, Pinnacle Peak and New River Mesa on the horizon. Higher up, the road winds around to the eastern slope of the mountain where the sprawling Verde River Valley and Horseshoe Lake come into view.

Just below the summit, the one and only hairpin turn in the road kisses the edge of a scenic saddle. Sycamore- and cottonwood-cluttered drainages appear nearly 2,000 feet below. The final slog to the summit rewards with excellent views and the revelation that the "golf ball" is hardly an accurate description of the FAA tower. It is most indubitably a *soccer* ball.

JEWEL OF THE CREEK PRESERVE

Desert Foothills Land Trust

This trail was engineered to showcase an impossibly green sliver of "desert jungle" where water runs year-round in the otherwise dry channel of Cave Creek. The Dragonfly Trail loops through the "Jewel of the Creek," an extraordinary strip of lush creekside willows, alders, walnut trees and cattails hemmed in by cactus-fringed canyon walls, making for a breathtaking hybrid desert-wetland hike.

The 26-acre property is one of several owned and managed by the Desert Foothills Land Trust, a local organization that preserves sensitive Sonoran Desert sites in Central Arizona. Although some of the preserves are open only by appointment, Jewel of the Creek can be visited from dawn to dusk daily. In addition to the moist creek biome, the locale is also home to a mesquite bosque, one of the rarest ecosystems on earth. Although most hikers explore happily on their own, the park ranger at adjacent Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area conducts regular guided tours for those who would like to learn more about the flora, fauna, geology and human history of the area.

Although this trek is short, its connectivity with the conservation area's trails that merge with the Valley-circumnavigating Maricopa Trail provides myriad opportunities for extended jaunts.

Jojoba
Blooms: December-July
Fruits: Summer

LENGTH: 2.6 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,150-2,400 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round (hike early morning in summer)

HOURS: dawn to dusk daily

FEE: $3 per person (exact change required)

FACILITIES: porta potties

GETTING THERE:

From Loop 101, exit at Cave Creek Road and drive north for approximately 15 miles to Spur Cross Ranch Road. This is a tricky intersection – the road swerves left and turns into Spur Cross Ranch Road. Continue north for 4.2 miles to the dirt parking on the left. The last mile or so of the road is good dirt and passable by sedan.

KIWANIS TRAIL

South Mountain Park

LENGTH: 2 miles round trip or 2.6 miles round trip to Telegraph Pass Lookout

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 1,580-2,060 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms nearby

GETTING THERE:

South Mountain Park:
10919 S. Central Ave., Phoenix

From the main park entrance at the end of Central Avenue, continue on Stephen Mather Drive and go left at the first four-way intersection. Take another left onto Piedras Grandes Drive and continue to the trailhead.

Long before the craggy hills that comprise South Mountain were outfitted with hiking trails and picnic ramadas, the Akimel O'odham (Pima) people referred to them as Muhadag Du'ag, or Greasy Mountain. The name comes from a Native American legend about how hot grease, dripping from the mouth of Trickster Coyote as he consumed food stolen from a cremation fire, gave the mountains their dark stains.

People have been leaving their marks on the mountain ranges south of Phoenix since pre-historic times. Archaeologists have attributed artifacts and petroglyphs (rock art) to a wide scope of peoples who lived in the area around what is now known as South Mountain Park.

Heritage sites in the park include a few rare signatures from hunter-gatherers of the Archaic period (2,000-8,000 years ago), thousands of Hohokam (A.D. 400-1450) etchings and the scribblings of early European settlers. Many of these artful and mysterious panels are visible from the more than 50 miles of hiking trails within the park.

In addition to several petroglyph sites with human forms, spiral patterns and animal designs tapped into stone by the park's ancient inhabitants, the Kiwanis Trail tours the park's more recent history. Established in 1924, the park was a major work center for the Civilian Conservation Corps between 1933 and 1940. During that time, roughly 4,000 workers constructed many of the park's trails and masonry/stone buildings. The Kiwanis Trail is a classic example of CCC construction projects. Its hand-hewn cuts, native-stone steps and check dams, built into drainages to slow the flow of water and minimize erosion, are relics of the Depression-era program.

Over its 1-mile course, the trail climbs 480 feet through a furrowed canyon to Telegraph Pass Road. As the trail gains elevation, views of Downtown Phoenix expand from sliver-glimpses to full-blown panoramas.

Heavy rain can cause Valley trails to become very muddy. Although it's advisable to avoid hiking on saturated trails to prevent damaging them, you won't encounter mucky quagmires on the Kiwanis Trail. The path is mostly hard-pack gravel and bare rock, and was built to drain quickly and withstand wet-weather use.

At the top of the trail, you can extend the hike by crossing the road to the National Trail for a short but steep hike to the Telegraph Pass Lookout. Situated on a knoll overlooking the Salt and Gila rivers' basin, the rustic stone hut serves as a convenient turnaround point or stop off before continuing. The 15-mile National Trail traces ridgeline crests for the entire length of the park.

MCDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY
See page 250.

MARCUS LANDSLIDE TRAIL

McDowell Sonoran Preserve

Mormon Tea
Blooms: February-March

This elegant interpretive hike in Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve pays homage to the complex geology found on the north side of the McDowell Mountains. Colorful signs along the trail enlighten hikers about the surrounding terrain – including an explanation of how the area's signature "mushroom" rocks formed.

But, of course, the main attraction is the ubiquitous landslide. If you didn't know it was there, you'd probably never even notice this massive slump in the mountainside. Discovered in 2002 by a pair of local geologists, the nearly mile-long wreckage is comprised of an estimated 25.8 billion pounds of rubble – enough material to fill Sun Devil Stadium six times. The slide occurred during the Pleistocene Ice Age about a half-million years ago, when a colder, wetter climate may have instigated it. When it shaved 1,200 feet off the ridgeline, it released energy equivalent to an atomic bomb blast.

The trail, which is named for former Arizona State University geography professor Melvin Marcus, loops among the slide's components for a comprehensive overview of the magnitude and scope of the event. The hike takes off from the Tom's Thumb trailhead and follows an easy grade through typical desert scrub with views of the Fountain Hills area, Verde River and Superstition Wilderness. To enhance your trail experience, refer to the preserve's website to take part in a steward-led hike.

LENGTH: 3.7-mile loop (4.2 miles with optional side trips)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 2,800 – 2,500 feet

HOURS: sunrise to sunset daily

FACILITIES: restrooms, horse trailer parking, no water

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

Tom's Thumb Trailhead:

From the Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Pima Road/Princess Drive exit 36 and continue 5 miles north on Pima to Happy Valley Road. Turn right (east) and go 4.1 miles on Happy Valley to Ranch Gate Road. Turn right on Ranch Gate. Follow it 1.2 miles then turn right onto 128th Street and continue 1 mile to the signed trailhead. Roads are paved all the way.

Chia
Blooms: March-May

LENGTH:

4 miles one way to Cave Creek Regional Park, or

6 miles one way to Spur Cross Conservation Area

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,050-2,295 feet (as described here)

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:
Andy Kunasek at Spear S Ranch Trailhead: 41799 N. New River Rd., New River

Go north on Interstate 17 to Carefree Highway (State Route 74) exit. Go east (right) to Seventh Street, turn north (left) and go 4.5 miles on Seventh (turns into New River Road) to the trailhead on the right, located just before Linda Lane.

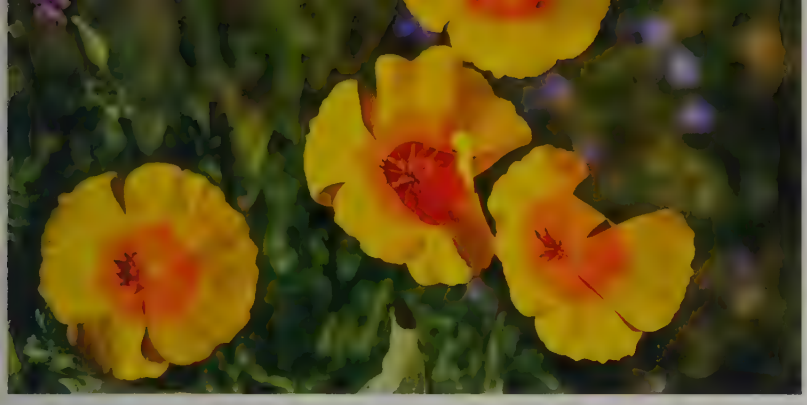
MARICOPA TRAIL: SPEAR S RANCH DAY HIKE

Maricopa County Parks and Recreation

Spanning 317 miles and linking 10 county parks, the Maricopa Trail is a unifying, non-motorized system of existing paths, closed roads and new construction. Forming a massive circle around the Valley, its course brushes against busy recreation sites, suburban neighborhoods and desert wilds with entry points in the parks and at special trailheads.

Spear S Trailhead was established in 2011 and gives access to a splendid stretch of rangeland via paths established by the Hohokam people, who lived in the area from about 300 B.C. to 1500 A.D. This is also cattle country, and a plaque near the trailhead features a list of early homesteaders whose roads and ranch sites still imprint the land. The Spear S trailhead is located roughly halfway between Lake Pleasant, Cave Creek Regional Park and Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area, making it a convenient launch for both day hikes and backpacking.

One scenic option is to do an out-and-back hike to the Cave Creek area parks. This route jogs along saguaro-inhabited hillsides, shady washes painted green with plant life and heart-stirring, open-desert terrain with 3,219-foot Apache Peak as a central beacon along the way. Trail signs are posted at all junctions, but can be easy to miss. At the 2.9-mile point, the trail splits. Turn north to continue to Spur Cross, or stay straight for Cave Creek.



Mexican Gold Poppy
Blooms: Spring

MESQUITE CANYON

White Tank Mountain Regional Park

Towering over cotton fields, citrus groves and an ever-expanding landscape of subdivisions, the White Tank Mountains on the western edge of Metro Phoenix rise to just over 4,000 feet.

For more than 30 million years, tectonic upheavals, volcanic events and erosion have shaped the range into a mass of canyons, ruptured ridgelines and scoured drainages where "white tanks"– depressions in buff-colored granite – retain rainwater. The inhospitable terrain is made approachable by way of the trails within White Tank Mountain Regional Park in Waddell.

Although the park has many family-friendly, effortless routes, most of its more than 30 miles of trails involve difficult to extreme mountain ascents. While challenging hiker favorites like Ford Canyon and Goat Camp pass through some hazardous sections of loose rock, precipitous edges and steep climbs, Mesquite Canyon Trail rises to equally dizzying heights with fewer obstacles.

The route may be accessed at either the main trailhead staging area or at ramada No. 7. Starting at the ramada bypasses about a mile of flat, easy hiking and delves right into the uphill trudge. The first quarter mile follows a roomy dirt track with benches placed at scenic overlooks.

One of the best features of this trail is that great views can be had after only a short bit of climbing, and the vistas continue to improve around every bend.

A half mile in, the lung pumping begins as the trail narrows and takes on a series of long switchbacks that snake up the canyon above a gorge with brilliant white stone at its base and a daisy chain of tanks.

Crowds become noticeably thinner once the path transitions into an edgy traverse of outcroppings of layered metamorphic rocks bent into accordion-like folds and gigantic boulders with peeling veneers. Tucked among clefts, scree and exposed ledges, springtime wildflowers give reasons to pause on the way up. Lush fringes of brittlebush, jojoba and cholla shade patches of dainty desert hideseed, lupine, Emory's rock daisies, globemallows, buckwheat, scorpionweed and bright orange Mexican gold poppies that unfurl when warmed by the afternoon sun.

The twisted terrain contains a glut of microclimates that bounce between mossy gullies and parched flats. The varied pockets of shade, sun and moisture foster a vast assortment of blooming plants.

At the 1.8-mile point, you can opt to make an 8.4-mile loop using the Willow Canyon and part of the Ford Canyon trails. Otherwise, continue uphill to the trek's high point and the junction with Goat Camp Trail above Slick Rock Canyon. This breezy turnaround perch makes for a fine lunch spot before descending.

◆

LENGTH: 5 miles one way from main trailhead or 4.2 miles one way from ramada No. 7

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 1,540-3,023 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms, water, ramadas, camping, horse area

GETTING THERE:

20304 W. White Tank Mountain Rd., Waddell

Follow the main park road to the trailhead staging area or continue to Waterfall Canyon.

METATE-SPUR CROSS LOOP

Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area

Located just a few clicks north of Metro Phoenix, Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area in Cave Creek is a 2,154-acre preserve with a surprisingly remote feel, a variety of hiking trails and a plethora of native vegetation that bursts with color when infused with a little extra precipitation. The site, which is part of the Maricopa County parks system, bumps up against the foothills of Tonto National Forest, where mountain-borne moisture flows through the area's creeks, washes and drainages in year-round fits and spurts.

Sometimes the water arrives in a rage, such as during spring snowmelt season and monsoon rains, but mostly, the water that spills over the site's hiking trails passes through in lazy trickles. Getting around the water-centric park rarely means getting your feet wet, though. When water levels are high, the park ranger places plank bridges to assist crossings of Cave Creek.

One water-centric hike to try during wetter times is the Metate-Spur Cross loop. This short, moderate-rated hike is a perfect place to introduce winter visitors to area trails and a botanical smorgasbord of native plants. Desert newbies will be awed by the medley of ecosystems, and even locals will likely gain deeper appreciation for the rare cocktail of vegetation living in this tiny plot.

Although the preserve is the smallest of the 10 county parks, it has the most diverse and profuse collection of Sonoran Desert plant species growing within its hilly space.

To optimize the plant tour, begin hiking northwest (go left at the main trailhead kiosk) on the Spur Cross Trail. The wide path makes a gradual descent among acres of brittlebush, jojoba and multiple species of cacti. Most prominent here are wolfberry shrubs dripping with ripe orange fruit and a demonstration garden of agaves. In less than a half mile, the ragged floodplain of Cave Creek hosts a riparian community of cottonwoods, willows and bunches of desert marigolds sprouting from the sandy corridor. Cross the creek and head right on the Metate Trail for a walk through a massive saguaro forest and an enchanting mesquite bosque – a streamside gallery forest. Be sure to make a stop at the solar oasis wildlife water hole and an ancient Native American metate, or grinding stone.

A detour on the 0.2-mile Towhee Trail reveals a damp, birdy enclave entwined with wild cucumber vines and desert hackberry shrubs. After a second creek crossing, the trail heads up an embankment where ocotillo, cholla and prickly pear cacti dress the walk on a ridge high above the water, while sweet views of New River and Skull Mesas stand as imposing bastions on the horizon.

At the 1.3-mile point, head right on the Spur Cross Trail for the final leg back to the trailhead. For a longer trek, consult the park website for maps or to join a ranger-led hike to the many hidden gems within the preserve.

LENGTH: 2.2-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,179-2,250 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round, but best April-October or after monsoon

FEE: $3 per person daily fee; exact change required for self-serve kiosk

FACILITIES: porta potties

GETTING THERE:

Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area, 37622 N Cave Creek Rd., Cave Creek:

From Loop 101 in Phoenix, take Cave Creek Road north to Spur Cross Road (on the left just as you enter the downtown area) and go 4.5 miles north to the parking area.

P.A. SEITTS PRESERVE at GO JOHN CANYON

Desert Foothills Land Trust

LENGTH: 2.3 miles total

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 1,960-2,120 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

P.A. Seitts Trailhead:

From the intersection of Carefree Highway and Cave Creek Road in Cave Creek, go 0.6 mile north to East New River Road. Turn left and go 0.3 mile to 54th Street. Turn right and continue 0.4 mile to the parking area on the right near the intersection of East Cloud Road and 52nd Street. No fees.

Tucked between Cave Creek Regional Park and horsey suburban neighborhoods, the P.A. Seitts Preserve at Go John Canyon is a tiny buffer zone of beauty. The site is owned and managed by the Desert Foothills Land Trust, a nonprofit organization that works to conserve Sonoran Desert open spaces, sensitive plants and native animal species in the North Valley. While some of the organization's 23 properties that protect 680 acres are off limits or viewable only by guided tours, P.A. Seitts is open to the public. The 271-acre site preserves an important wildlife corridor, riparian habitat and historical elements along Cave Creek. Several hiking trails and nature paths explore the property's various points of interest. To get to the trails, hike 0.2 mile on the access path to a gate and the main trail junction. A good way to begin is to take the right fork and knock off the moderate Overlook Trail first.

This 0.6-mile one-way path climbs along a slim, craggy path to the preserve's high point, making a loop around the summit for an exceptional overview of the area. The dark silhouette of Black Mountain looms in the east, while the colorful gorge of Cave Creek, hazy urban contours and the hills of Tonto National Forest complete the panorama.

Once done exploring, descend back to the gate and continue north on the wide Jeep Trail (aka Military Road). Just over a half mile from the gate, veer right at a two-way junction. Although it's not signed, this short road is the Cemetery Trail. Hike 0.3 mile to a "T" junction, and head left to a historical graveyard where several early Cave Creek settlers are buried. The burial ground has a reverent yet wild west feel to it. A random collection of dusty stone circles and wooden planks mark a few resting places, but mostly the dead lie in blissful secrecy. To continue, retrace your steps back to the Jeep Trail and continue north. You'll notice signs stating that permits are required to enter the State Trust land that's part of a patchwork of preserve, park and private properties in the area. No worries, though. If you stay on the designated trails, you do not need a permit.

The Jeep Trail continues for 1.1 mile, paralleling the creek and its avenue of cottonwoods, mesquites and willows. In late fall and winter, the trees display canopies of golden leaves. Enormous saguaros, contorted ironwood trees and a smattering of dilapidated barbed wire fences populate the foothills, complementing an already visually rich trek. Along this stretch, you'll encounter two rusty metal posts that mark spur paths that go into Cave Creek Regional Park. The second post denotes the preserve boundary and the turnaround point for the hike.

PALO VERDE TRAIL

Bartlett Lake

From the drive in to the trailhead to its turnaround point, this hike is packed with stunning scenery. Hedged among the rough-cut cliffs and desert highlands of the Verde River watershed, Bartlett Reservoir fills 12 miles of the canyon-bound channel with crystalline waters teeming with bass, catfish and bluegills. Although the year-round recreation site roughly 50 miles north of Phoenix is famous mostly for its boating, fishing, shaded picnic areas and camping opportunities, the Palo Verde Trail offers hikers a surprisingly challenging route with terrific mountain and water views. The trail meanders among foothills and washes on the lake's western banks. This is not a hike to try during or immediately after storms because rain rumbling off the foothills turns washes and gullies into raging rivers of debris.

Don't be fooled by the hike's minimal elevation change – the trail is a deceptively convoluted series of twists, steep climbs and slippery descents on a base of crumbling granite and sand. Overall, you will have accumulated more than 900 feet of elevation gain over the 9.4-mile, out-and-back trek. The trail wastes no time getting you up into the hills above Rattlesnake Cove for breathtaking vistas of the distant peaks of the Mazatzal Wilderness and fire tower-capped Mount Ord. Across the water, the hulking profiles of Maverick and SB mountains in Tonto National Forest bolster the reservoir's 33 miles of shoreline, casting shadows on peninsulas and islands that morph in size with water levels. In springtime, the hills are ablaze in wildflower glory. Look for desert lavender, chuparosa, brittlebush, Mexican gold poppies, filaree, lupines and blooming cholla and saguaro cacti.

Beyond the marina, near the 3-mile point, the trail splits. The path to the left is a spur that shaves a mile off the route. To the right, the main trail makes a hairpin loop among deep washes, quartz mounds and areas of washouts that make the route somewhat difficult to follow. Strategically placed rock barriers and cairns mark the way.

Soon, you'll reach the beachy inlet of SB Cove. Strewn with driftwood, this cozy notch in the landscape is a favorite stomping ground for blue heron and seasonal shorebirds. The route terminates a short walk from the SB Cove Recreation Site. If you didn't park a shuttle vehicle there, return the way you came.

LENGTH: 4.7 miles one way or 3.7 with shortcut

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 1,798-1,882 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: Tonto Pass is required to park: $8 daily fee per vehicle

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic ramadas

GETTING THERE:

From Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Pima Road/Princess Drive exit 36 and go 13 miles north on Pima and turn right on Cave Creek Road. Continue 4.1 miles to Bartlett Dam Road, turn right and go 12.6 miles to North Shore Road (Forest Road 459). Turn left and continue 0.6 mile to the turn off Rattlesnake Cove Recreation Site (Forest Road 459A). Park at the last restroom at the south end of the parking loop. Walk down the stairs behind the restrooms and head right toward the trailhead sign.

PEORIA MOUNTAIN TRAILS

City of Peoria

Strawberry Hedgehog Cactus
Blooms: March-April

Desert Globemallow
Blooms: Year-round

EAST WING MOUNTAIN TRAIL

LENGTH: 2.4 miles

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: 1,476-1,916 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic ramadas

GETTING THERE:

Sonoran Mountain Ranch Park: 7098 W. Miner Trail, Peoria

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to Happy Valley Road exit 218. Go 5 miles west (left) on Happy Valley to 67th Avenue, turn right and drive 2.8 miles (road becomes Pyramid Peak Parkway) to Sonoran Mountain Ranch Road. Veer left and go 0.5 mile to Chalfen Boulevard, turn left, continue 0.1 mile to Miner Trail and follow the signs to Sonoran Mountain Ranch Park. From the post near the restrooms, hike 0.15 mile south on Chalfen to the official trailhead. Do not park along residential streets.

WEST WING MOUNTAIN TRAIL

LENGTH: 3.4 or 3.5 miles (including 0.2-mile access trail from the park)

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 1,400-1,903 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic ramadas

GETTING THERE:

27100 N. Westwing Pkwy., Peoria

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to Loop 303 exit 22. Turn left (west) and continue 7 miles to Lake Pleasant Parkway exit 131, turn left (south) and go 2.3 miles to Westwing Parkway. Turn left and go 1 mile to West Wing Park on the right. Trail begins at the west side of the parking lot. Do not park along residential streets.

With a combined length of more than 11 miles, Peoria's East Wing, West Wing, Sunrise and Calderwood Butte mountain trails combine outstanding North Valley views with customizable lengths and difficulty levels. Here are two to try.

EAST WING MOUNTAIN TRAIL

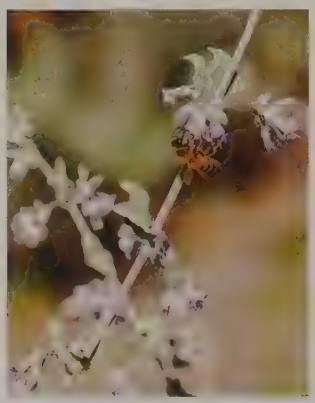
If you're new to hiking or looking for a way to build stamina, this cluster of West Valley trails offers three options ranging from easy to difficult. Although none of the trails stray very far from suburban backyards, the difficult-rated summit loop gains enough elevation to provide a good workout backed by excellent scenic views. The trail is well-constructed, with hairpin switchbacks and staircase-like rock slabs that make climbing the steep chutes manageable for even novice hikers. The trek is a surprisingly quiet journey, and save for the occasional yapping of the local Yorkshire terriers guarding their patios, the soundtrack is one of breezes through palo verde trees and the hum of wind-rustled saguaro needles.

WEST WING MOUNTAIN TRAIL

Every town and city in the Valley has its popular workout trail where the hordes converge for their daily dose of sweat and grind. Examples are Camelback Mountain in Phoenix and, Scottsdale's Pinnacle Peak. Not to be left out of the fitness frenzy, Peoria's trek of choice is West Wing Mountain. Unlike its neighbors, which offer one option – moderately difficult, straight up-and-down trudges – this system of loop trails offers you a choice of difficult and extreme options. Although the trails are well maintained and not too steep, the difficult rating is likely because of the slickrock and loose scree underfoot.

The mountain is actually an undulating ridgeline with trails wrapping up and around scenic viewpoints and a high summit. Rising above a Northwest Valley suburban domain of kids and culs-de-sac, the trails dodge among crusty cliffs and barrel cactus showcasing ever-improving views as the routes gain elevation. At the top of the extreme loop, views of a sea of terra cotta roofs nuzzling up to the mountain's base and West Valley mountains form a 360-degree panorama beyond a familiar landscape of freeways and shopping malls.

PHOENIX SONORAN PRESERVE, NORTH



Desert Lavender
Blooms: Year-round

LENGTH: 5.5 miles (as described here)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 1,720-2,002 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: 5 a.m. to sunset or 7 p.m., whichever comes first

FACILITIES: restrooms, shaded seating, horse staging area, map kiosk (no water)

GETTING THERE:

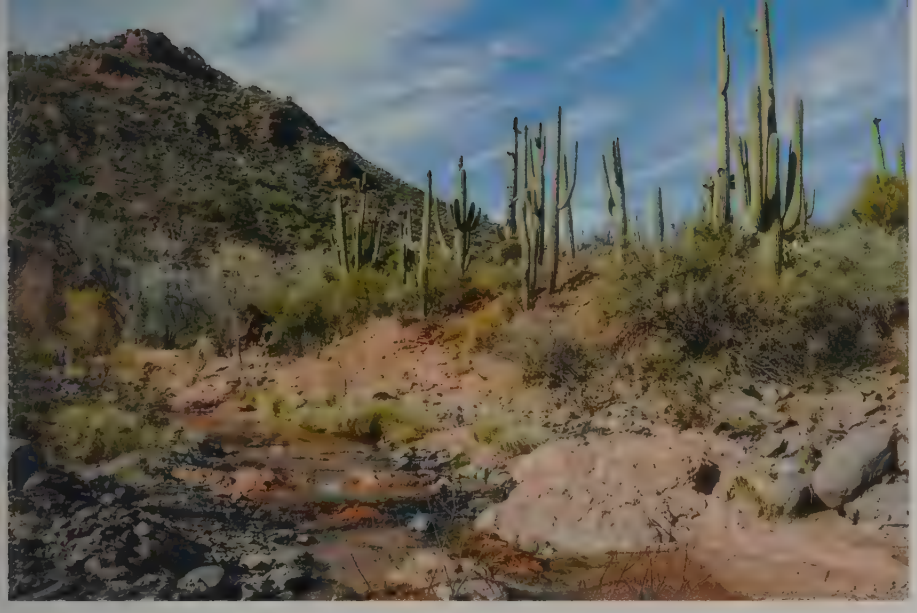
From Loop 101 in North Phoenix, take Cave Creek Road exit 28 and go 4.5 miles north to Sonoran Desert Drive. Turn left (west) and continue 3.5 miles to the trailhead on the right.

On Saturday, November 9, 2013, former Phoenix mayor Skip Rimsza and city officials dedicated the Apache Vista trailhead amid a crowd of eager Valley hikers, bikers and equestrians.

With 21 miles of trails to choose from, deciding where to begin exploring this northern extension of Phoenix Sonoran Preserve can be a dilemma. Suggestion: Head for the hills.

Ridgeback Overlook and Apache Vista are high points capping this hub of Sonoran Desert trails. A map board at the trailhead shows how to cobble together a route to climb to both hilltops. The peaks each have short loop trails winding over the cholla-encrusted summits that give excellent 360-degree views of the trail system layout and iconic Valley landmarks.

Here's how to get there: From the trailhead, hike north on Sidewinder Trail to Apache Vista. After ascending, hike back down and continue on Sidewinder, connect with Apache Wash Trail, turn left and hike to Ocotillo Trail. Turn right, hike Ridgeback Trail to the overlook loop. Climb back down, backtrack to the Ocotillo/Apache Wash junction and follow Ocotillo back to the trailhead.



RED CREEK

Tonto National Forest

Crystal clear, gurgling waters, red rock cliffs, shady mesquite forests and towering canyon walls make hiking Red Creek an especially relaxing experience.

A tributary of the Verde River, Red Creek creates a narrow band of green in the desert and supports abundant plant and animal life. Simple and serene, the trail follows the creek and four-wheel-drive roads. Stream hopping is a major feature of this hike, but the creek bed is gravel (not mud) and the water is anything but deep or treacherous. The creek emerges from the canyon at about the 3-mile mark and trickles into a desert wash with big-sky views and miles of river rock underfoot.

On the near horizon, a ribbon of green jutting over ridges is a sure sign a major water source is nearby. Keep following the trickle and it will lead you to the waters and beaches of the upper Verde River.

LENGTH: 8 miles out and back

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,210-2,660 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Carefree, follow Cave Creek Road (which turns onto Forest Road 24) for 32 miles to the Forest Road 269 junction (Bloody Basin Road), turn right. Go about 3 miles and turn left onto Forest Road 18. Proceed roughly 2.5 miles. Park in the dirt turnoff just before the steep descent to Red Creek. Expect 2.5 hours on dirt roads. Note: FR 18 is rough and requires at least a high-clearance vehicle.

RICHINBAR MINE

Aqua Fria National Monument

Few places in Arizona are as rich in history as the mesas and valleys of Agua Fria National Monument. Straddling the canyon-riddled grasslands along Interstate 17 between Black Canyon City and Cordes Junction, the area's complex landscape can be viewed from behind the wheel of a car or by stopping at Sunset Point rest area. However, it takes hiking into the guts of this wild place to really appreciate its significance. Although most of the monument is on very rugged terrain, this historic mining operation is one of only three spots that almost anybody can get to without much fuss. (Pueblo La Plata and Badger Springs Wash are the other two.) The hike begins at a locked gate just off the freeway and follows a dirt road past a windmill with water troughs for the cattle that graze the surrounding flatlands.

In just under a mile, the road reaches the cliffs overlooking Agua Fria River Canyon. This is a good place to get an overview of the layout and plan your exploring before descending to the site. Concrete foundations and random heaps of rotting wood, rusty metal and barbed wire are all that remain of Richinbar Mine. Clinging to the steep inclines above the canyon and below the low-slung mound of Joe's Hill volcano, the mine operated from the 1880s to the 1940s under various owners that pulled tons of copper, lead, gold and silver from the desolate hills. Three major mine shafts – one at least 500 feet deep – are on the site. Although they're cordoned off by barbed wire, it's wise to use extreme caution around these holes.

Long before the rich ore drew modern-day miners to the area, the mesas surrounding the mine were inhabited by Native Americans who built seven major cities and hundreds of satellite dwellings that now stand as crumbling foundations throughout the monument. The locations of most ruins are not publicized to aid preservation, however, there's a well-known petroglyph site on the pinnacle to the far north of the mine with elegant etchings of antelope and deer.

○

LENGTH: 1.5 miles one way to the mine

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 3,370–3,497 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to the Sunset Point rest area. From here, continue 1.7 miles to the turnoff for Forest Road 9006 on the right. A windmill and stock tanks are landmarks. (If you reach Badger Springs Road, you've gone 2.3 miles too far.) Turn onto FR 9006 and park in the dirt. Do not block the gate. The gate is usually locked, but it's easy (and legal) to squeeze through. Roads are paved up to the dirt parking area. Follow the dirt road straight ahead to get to the mine site.

Blackfoot Daisy
Blooms: Spring

SKUNK TANK – CAVE CREEK LOOP

Tonto National Forest

A hike along this old classic circuit north of Cave Creek just beyond the Seven Springs Recreation Area features deep canyons, edgy trails, flowing water, interesting botanical specimens and see-forever views of desert mesas.

From the Cave Creek Trailhead, begin hiking counterclockwise on the Skunk Tank Trail 246. This open-to-the-sky segment makes a steady climb over rolling, cacti-studded foothills. At 1.4 miles from the 246 junction, runoff from Quien Sabe ("Who knows?" in Spanish) Spring spills down a narrow gully. The spring itself is 0.3 mile up the gully, but it's a bushwhack to get there and, frankly, not worth the effort. Skunk Tank Trail tops out at a 4,100-foot lookout point with dizzying views of New River Mesa, Humboldt Mountain and Quien Sabe Peak.

From here, the route plunges downhill toward Skunk Tank on a slim path cut into sloping, exposed (not for acrophobics) hillsides. The tank is a lovely, willow-ringed oasis where swarms of birds and wildlife like mountain lions and deer gather to quench their thirsts and maybe score a meal. Pass through the tank's rustic barbed wire fence and soon the junction with Cave Creek Trail 4 comes into view, signaling the final leg of the hike. This is also the best part, because Trail 4 traces the course of Cave Creek as it moves among lofty canyon walls, a lush riparian ecosystem and rare crested saguaros.

LENGTH: 10.4-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,980-4,100 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

Cave Creek Trailhead (as described here):

From the Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Pima Road/Princess Drive exit 36 and go 13 miles north on Pima to Cave Creek Road. Turn right (east) and go 12.5 miles on Cave Creek (aka FR 24 and Seven Springs Road) past Seven Springs Recreation Area to Cave Creek Trailhead on the left between MCDOT mile markers 12 and 13. Roads are a mix of pavement and good dirt passable by passenger cars when dry. Two creek crossings on cement are required – do not attempt after heavy rain.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

From the trailhead, pick up Cave Creek Trail 4 and hike 0.6 mile south to the Cottonwood Trail 247 junction. Follow 247 less than a mile to the Skunk Tank Trail 246. Follow 246 to Cave Creek Trail 4, turn right and follow it back to the trailhead.

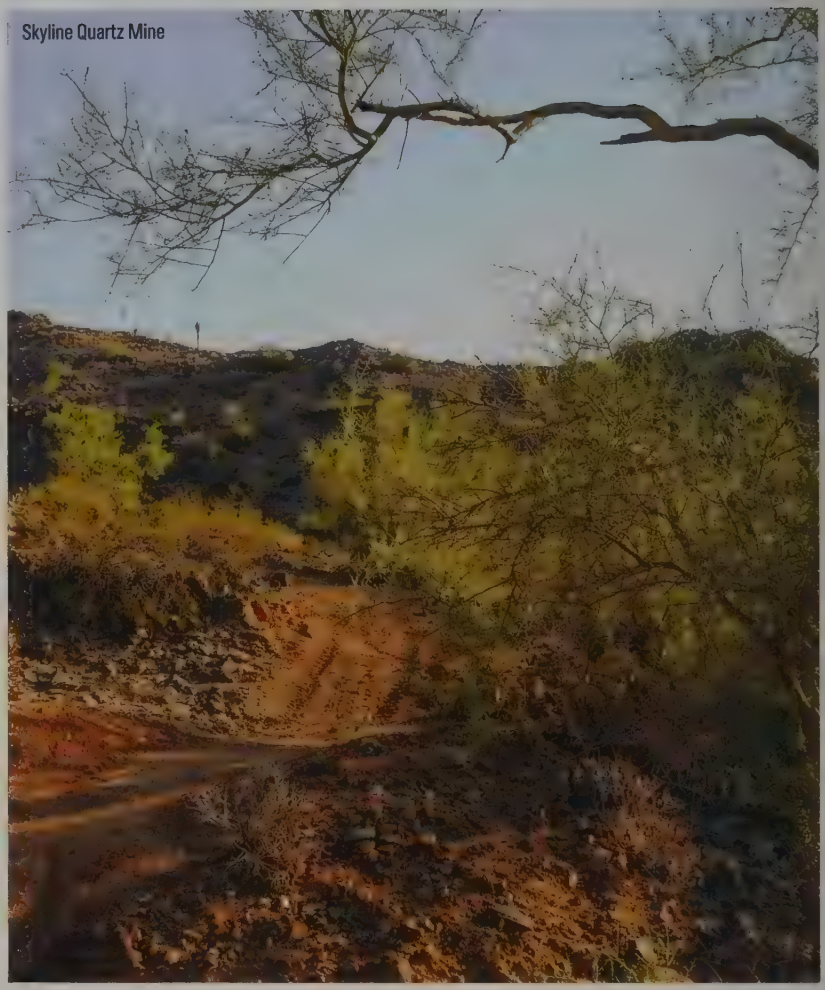
SKYLINE REGIONAL PARK

Buckeye

With nearly 20 miles of non-motorized trails and still growing, 8,675-acre Skyline Regional Park in Buckeye, which opened in November 2015, is quickly becoming the West Valley's go-to place for quality outdoor recreation. Located just 2 miles north of Interstate 10, in the southern sector of the White Tank Mountains, the park features paved access roads, a gatehouse, a developed trailhead, plenty of parking, a horse staging area, picnic ramadas, restrooms and camping sites along with an environmental education programming area.

A 133-foot rustic bridge spans a gaping desert wash to connect hikers, equestrians and bikers to trails. The routes range in challenge level from barrier-free to difficult, and each is surrounded by breathtaking Sonoran Desert plants and wildlife. Deer, javelina, desert fox, raptors and the Sonoran Desert Tortoise live among the park's rich stands of ironwood, palo verde and mesquite trees that shade colorful spreads of wildflowers, native vines and blooming cacti.

Hikers of all experience levels feel welcome in this mountainous park. While the difficult Valley Vista, Pyrite, Javelina Summit and Skyline Crest trails lead to dizzying high points and big-sky views, the milder Tortuga and Granite Falls Loop are suitable for just about everybody.



Skyline Quartz Mine

Red-Tailed Hawk
This common predator hunts rodents, reptiles, birds and amphibians. Its distinctive red tail feathers develop when the bird is 2 years old.

LENGTH: 19.96 miles for 17 trails

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: 1,300-2,300 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: sunrise to sunset daily

FACILITIES: restrooms, water, ramadas, camping, horse area

GETTING THERE:

Located 1 mile north of Interstate 10 off of Watson Road exit 117 in Buckeye.

SONORAN DESERT (HAWES) TRAIL SYSTEM

Tonto National Forest, Mesa Ranger District

LENGTH: 10.3 miles (maintained trails only)

Hawes Trail No. 52: 3.4 miles

Ridge Trail No. 59: 1.7 miles

Granite Trail No. 54: 0.7 mile

Saguaro Trail No. 50: 3.1 miles

Saddle Trail No. 51: 1.4 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 1,150-1,760 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go east on Loop 202 to exit 23 for Power Road in Mesa. Travel 2.1 miles north on Power Road to the Hawes Trailhead on the left. Trail begins across the road.

Originally constructed by mountain bike enthusiasts, this intertwining system of trails overlooking Granite Reef Dam on the Salt River in Mesa is just too interesting for hikers to ignore.

In 2005, 10.3 miles of the 20-mile web of social trails were adopted into the Tonto National Forest System. As would be expected of bike trails, these routes offer an entertaining mashup of twists and swooping turns tracing the site's hills and valleys. The five-trail maze is also known as the Hawes System, after the longest route in the mix.

As bikers heavily use these trails, hikers should stay alert and share the dirt. Trail courtesy dictates that bikers yield to hikers, and everybody yields to horses – especially the wild mustangs that roam this riverside terrain. However, a bike careening through a hairpin turn at breakneck speed won't necessarily be able to avoid you without drawing blood. So, although riders on these trails are generally careful, be prepared to relinquish the right of way whenever possible. After all, they were here first.

Buckwheat
Blooms: February-June

THUNDERBIRD CONSERVATION PARK

City of Glendale

With more than 14 miles of trails spread over a 1,185-acre preserve, Thunderbird Conservation Park offers easy access to desert hiking. The park's eight trails weave around Hedgpeth Hills – a chain of peaks capped with black basalt boulders tucked among subdivisions and bustling roadways.

Bisected by 55th Avenue, the park's east and west sections are connected by a pedestrian bridge. Three of the trails ascend to summits with cityscape views, while others wend around ridgelines and a wetland area with wildlife viewing blinds. The trails had been identified by a nondescript number system (H1, H2, etc.), but new names are much more colorful and speak to each route's distinct character. For instance, Flatlander (aka H1A), is – well, flat and sweat-free, while Chuckwalla Trail (H5A) meanders through the park's prime "fat lizard" territory.

A good way to sample the trails and get an overview of the area is to hike up to the flagpole on Arrowhead Point Trail (H2) and loop back on Coach Whip Trail (H1) with a side trip to the wetlands. This trek begins at the Pinnacle Peak Road trailhead and climbs swiftly to the 0.75-mile point, where an American flag anchored in a pile of volcanic rubble denotes the park's highest point. From here, the trail descends down to a junction near some ramadas. Go left to visit the wetlands, then backtrack for a 4-mile out-and-back trek.

Scorpionweed
Blooms: February-May

LENGTH: 8 trails ranging from 0.25 mile to 5 miles

RATING: easy to moderately difficult

ELEVATION: 1,400-1,862 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: sunrise to sunset daily

FACILITIES: restrooms, horse staging, shade ramadas

GETTING THERE:

North Entrance (as described here): Pinnacle Peak Road between 53rd and 55th avenues. Go north on Interstate 17 to the Pinnacle Peak Road exit 217 and drive 3.5 miles west to 55th Avenue.

Main Entrance: 22600 N. 59th Ave., Glendale

TOM'S THUMB

McDowell Sonoran Preserve

MCDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY

See page 250.

Visible from most of Scottsdale, the curious rock knob known as Tom's Thumb stands out among the pinnacles of the McDowell Mountains.

With its challenging grade and Valley-wide panoramas, Tom's Thumb Trail is one of the most popular routes in Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve. The 5-mile trail makes a constant but manageable ascent with scenic viewpoints.

From the Tom's Thumb trailhead, the path begins with a moderate "warm-up" section before taking on the switchbacks that ascend among massive granite outcroppings and classic desert vegetation.

After roughly 300 feet of climbing, mountain vistas to the north and east begin to shine. As the trail ascends, the familiar profiles of the Superstition and Sierra Ancha mountains jut from the eastern horizon.

At the 2-mile point, the major climbing ends where a short spur path leads to the base of Tom's Thumb. The soaring, 140-foot lump of craggy granite is even more impressive up close. Navigating the 0.3-mile access path requires some minor scrambling to reach the goal. Once through the maze, wander around Tom's Thumb perimeter to see shallow caves and a cathedral-like corridor with a breezeway that opens to views of Elephant Mountain in Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area and peaks of the Cave Creek Mountains and Tonto National Forest. The mountains may seem beyond reach, but you can get to them from the McDowells by hiking the Valley-circumnavigating Maricopa Trail that connects 10 county parks, suburbs, cities and open space over its more than 300-mile, non-motorized course.

Many hikers are satisfied to call the Tom's Thumb formation their turnaround point for a 4.6-mile trip. However, the trail bends to the southwest and continues on a deceptively easy-looking descent to its terminus at Windgate Pass Trail. Once you commit to following the trail to this point, you'll need to decide if you want to complete the hike with a tough long loop, a car shuttle one way or an out-and-back hike.

Use the preserve's free downloadable maps to navigate its more than 200 miles of pristine desert trails.

◆

LENGTH: 2.3 miles one way to Tom's Thumb, or 5 miles one way for entire trail

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION:

To Tom's Thumb: 2,813-3,925 feet

Entire trail: 2,438-3,925 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: sunrise-sunset daily

FACILITIES: restrooms, horse trailer parking, no water

GETTING THERE:

Tom's Thumb Trailhead: 23015 N. 128th St., Scottsdale

From Loop 101 in Scottsdale, take the Pima Road/Princess Drive exit 36. Continue 5 miles north to Happy Valley Road. Turn right (east) and go 4.1 miles on Happy Valley to Ranch Gate Road. Turn right, go 1.2 miles, then turn right onto 128th Street. Continue 1 mile to the signed trailhead. Roads are paved.

LENGTH: 7.45 miles round trip

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 1,600-2,200 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms, no water, plenty of parking, trail map sign, lot for horse trailers

GETTING THERE:

Desert Vista Trailhead:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to Jomax Road exit. Go 0.2 mile on Jomax to Norterra Parkway, turn left (north) and continue 1.2 miles to North Valley Parkway. Turn right (south) and go 0.2 mile to Copperhead Trail. Turn left and go just a few yards to Melvern Trail. Turn left on Melvern and go 0.1 mile to Desert Vista Trail on the right. Follow Desert Vista through a gate that leads to the trailhead.

UNION PEAK – GREAT HORNED OWL LOOP

Phoenix Sonoran Preserve, South

Hiding in plain sight off Interstate 17 north of the Jomax Road exit, Union Peak is an easy-to-conquer summit in the Phoenix Sonoran Preserve.

Hawk's Nest Trail

Getting to the peak involves connecting several trails and, although there are many options, the most direct route is described here. On the way to the peak, hikers are treated to mellow passages studded with cholla and desert shrubs, dips into rugged arroyos and climbs to high points with gorgeous views. The final 0.45-mile uphill leg to the peak has a couple of tricky steep spots, but it's otherwise just a moderate slog. The summit is composed of three stony humps linked by a footpath.

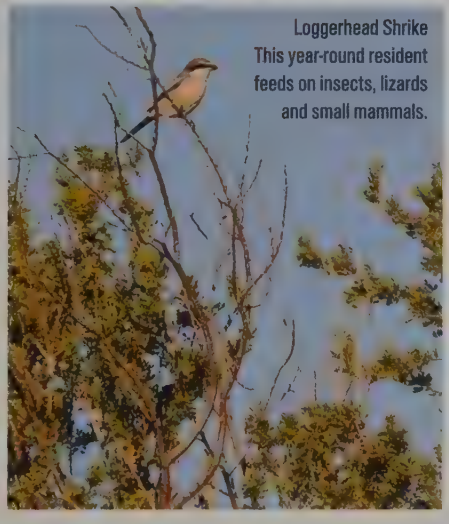
Here's the quickest way to get up Union Peak: From the trailhead, begin on Hawk's Nest Trail and hike to the turnoff for Desert Tortoise Trail at the 0.25-mile post. Turn right (southeast) and follow Desert Tortoise 1.12 mile to Valle Verde Trail. Turn right (south) and continue 0.6 mile on Valle Verde to Great Horned Owl Trail. This is the loop portion of the hike, so you can go right or left. However, if you plan to hike up Union Peak, go left to get there quicker. Once done with the loop, retrace your steps back to the trailhead.

YAVAPAI POINT

Lake Pleasant Regional Park

One of three new hiking paths that debuted in November 2014 at Lake Pleasant Regional Park, Yavapai Point Trail adds a moderate climb and sweeping vistas to the park's six-trail, 8.3-mile system. The hike begins at the Cottonwood Day Use Area with a 0.2-mile walk on Pipeline Canyon Trail to the Yavapai Point junction. Here, the trail swerves toward the water, following the cliffs above the lake. A scenic viewpoint at roughly the half-mile point serves as an appetizer for what awaits hikers at trail's end.

From here, the hike becomes an edgy, switchback-moderated ridgeline climb with views of Cottonwood Creek, Fireman's Cove and Pipeline Canyon. The hike's big payoff is a panorama of the lake and surrounding desert mountains on the breezy summit. From here, you can return the way you came or connect with Pipeline Canyon, hike 1.9 miles south and step out on the Wild Burro Trail.



Loggerhead Shrike
This year-round resident feeds on insects, lizards and small mammals.

LENGTH: 3.4 miles round trip (Yavapai Point out and back)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 1,782-2,178 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: $7 daily fee per vehicle

FACILITIES: restrooms, water, picnic ramadas, camping, nature center

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to Carefree Highway/State Route 74 exit 223. Head west (toward Wickenburg) to Castle Hot Springs Road. Turn right and drive 5.4 miles to the Lake Pleasant North access road. Turn right (pay fee at gate) and go 0.4 mile to the turnoff for Cottonwood picnic area. Turn right and go 0.4 mile to the Pipeline Canyon trailhead.

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SUPERSTITION MOUNTAINS & COPPER CORRIDOR

ARIZONA TRAIL PASSAGE 16

Gila River Canyons

LENGTH: 26 miles one way

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 1,646-3,714 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

For access points and up-to-date conditions, visit the Arizona Trail website. Become a member and gain access to additional data, support and special events. *aztrail.org*

The "golden spike" moment for the Arizona Trail is marked only by a simple brass survey post set in a concrete base banked with native rocks. Dedicated on December 16, 2011, the low-key monument that sits above the banks of the Gila River near the town of Kelvin denotes the completion of a decades-long effort to build a non-motorized recreation trail from Mexico to Utah.

The monument bears the initials of Dale Shewalter, the "Father of the Arizona National Scenic Trail." Sadly, Shewalter did not live to see the completion of the trans-Arizona trail he worked for beginning in the 1980s. The understated tribute on a ridge overlooking a river and trellis bridge at the gateway to one of the trail's most spectacular segments is an apt tribute to the tenacious teacher, activist and adventurer. It's also the keystone of one of the most technically challenging and profoundly beautiful segments of the 800+-mile route.

Former Arizona Trail director David Hicks, who has backpacked the 26-mile Gila River Canyons Passage 16, enthusiastically recommends it for skilled hikers looking for an epic experience. "I feel it is only second to the Grand Canyon in scenic beauty – and there are many sections of the Arizona Trail that fit that description," Hicks says. "In the Gila River Canyons, there are some sections so remote that you will likely not see another person during the time that you might spend in this passage."

According to Francisco Mendoza, a Bureau of Land Management Tucson Field Office outdoor recreation planner and the architect behind the segment, there are many reasons this section of the trail was the last to be completed. "There were the problems of access, rugged terrain, protecting sensitive ecosystems and archaeological sites and the need to work with land owners, mine claims, ranching operations and government agencies," he says. The placid riverside start belies a wild and diverse trip through pristine backcountry with surprises along the way. For instance, the 15 miles of trail near the communities of Kelvin and Riverside is one of only two sections of the AZT that runs along a perennial flowing stream.

Beyond the water, the trail swings north, climbs steadily for several miles and then opens to what Hicks calls "jaw-dropping awesome scenery." Gaping canyons, amazing rock formations and miles of untainted natural beauty are the payoff for the grueling trek. Passage 16 ends in the middle of nowhere, with no reliable water sources or easy exits, so it's imperative that those attempting it understand the route and have a plan.

"Eleven miles north of the river, the passage ends," Hicks says. "But trail users aren't done when they get to that spot. There's another 12 miles of Arizona Trail in the Alamo Canyon Passage 17 to the Picket Post Trailhead near U.S. 60. It's great backpacking."

BLACK MESA LOOP

Superstition Wilderness Area

It may be just a stone's throw from town, but hiking out from the First Water Trailhead at the western edge of the Superstition Wilderness is a surprisingly alien experience. Because the first mile or so of hiking in this area is considered to be easy, the site is a big draw for parents herding a mixed lot of dogs and kids outfitted with SpongeBob backpacks and spiffy shoes that light up in sync with their stride. But within a few miles, the hike changes to a more raw, rugged experience. A popular circuit here is the Black Mesa Loop that uses the Dutchman's, Black Mesa and Second Water trails for a continually changing tour of this wild pocket of desert in Tonto National Forest.

Beyond its easy first mile, the route transitions into a twisted collection of dips, climbs and tricky crossings of boulder-clogged washes and creeks. Soon, the crowds become noticeably thinner. A sturdy pair of boots and hiking poles for balance will help get you through the rough parts to reap the rewarding views of a volcanic landscape scoured by millions of years of exposure to the earth's turbulent elements. You'll be swallowed up in a wonderland of oddly shaped pinnacles, gaping canyons and raw arroyos. Add to that the effects of changing light over the course of an afternoon, and it's easy to feel as if you have been transported to another planet. For an extra treat, hang around until dusk and watch the stars come out for a show that's more brilliant than light-up shoes.

LENGTH: 9-mile loop

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 2,200-2,750 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

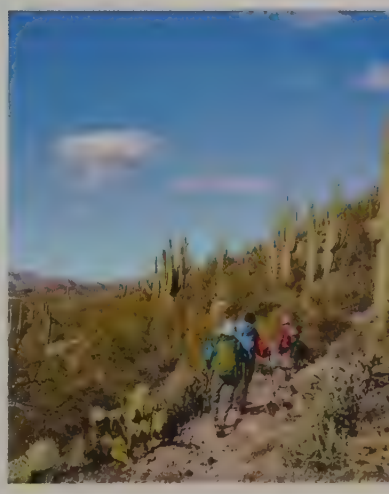
FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go east on U.S. 60 to the Idaho Road (State Route 88) exit. Turn left and follow Idaho to SR 88, turn right and continue to First Water Road (Forest Road 78), which is located about a half mile past the entrance to Lost Dutchman State Park (between mileposts 201 and 202) and is signed for First Water Trailhead. Turn right and go 2.6 miles to the trailhead. Forest Road 78 is on maintained dirt with some potholes and washboard sections passable by carefully driven sedan.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

From the trailhead, follow the access path 0.3 mile to the Dutchman's Trail 104 junction. Veer right (south) and follow 104 3.9 miles to the Black Mesa Trail 241 junction. Turn left (northwest) here and continue 3 miles on 241 to the Second Water Trail 236 junction, turn left (south) and follow 236 1.5 miles back to the Dutchman's junction. Turn right and hike 0.3 mile back to the trailhead.



COFFEE FLAT to WHITLOW CANYON

Superstition Wilderness Area

Springtime brings a magical transition to the Superstition Wilderness. It's a time of renewal for winter-worn shrubs and the gray stubble of last year's flora. With enough precipitation, the craggy, hilly terrain transforms from a muted desert palette into a blaze of vibrant color when native trees, shrubs and flowers bloom. Although most any trail in the Superstitions would be good for viewing wildflowers, the routes leaving from the Peralta trailhead are particularly productive due to the way water rolls down from hoodoo-edged ridgelines over loose-soil slopes before settling into deeply incised canyons where mesquite and palo verde trees play nurse maids to myriad perennials.

Because of its terrain that vacillates between sunny mesas and moist drainages, a hike on the Dutchman's and Coffee Flat trails reveals a wide range of floral specimens and a scenic rustic corral as a bonus. Wild hyacinth, fiddleneck, scorpionweed, buckwheat, brittlebush, red maids, filaree and Mexican gold poppies burst from fields and rock crevasses.

LENGTH: 9.2 miles round trip

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 2,287-2,680 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, travel east on U.S. 60 to Apache Junction. Continue roughly 8 miles to Peralta Road (FR 77) located between mileposts 204 and 205. There's also a sign indicating Peralta Trailhead. Turn left and follow Peralta Road 7.2 miles to the trailhead.

The tour begins at the Peralta trailhead on the Dutchman's Trail 104 where tiny riparian eco-zones and lingering pools of water among massive volcanic stone outcroppings feed lush corridors of blooming plants. At 2.6 miles, veer right at the signed junction for the Coffee Flat Trail 108. From the junction, the terrain morphs from a canyon maze into more open rangeland with acres of gold poppies and stands of mesquite trees that offer sporadic shade.

At 4.3 miles, the route comes to the prominent wash of Whitlow Canyon. Cross the wash and within a few yards, look for a cairned "Y" intersection. Take the right fork and hike to the old stock corral at Whitlow Canyon. The knotted barbed wire and rusty signs tangled with mesquite branches and tall grasses are slowly succumbing to the elements while holding fast to their old west character.

HACKBERRY SPRING

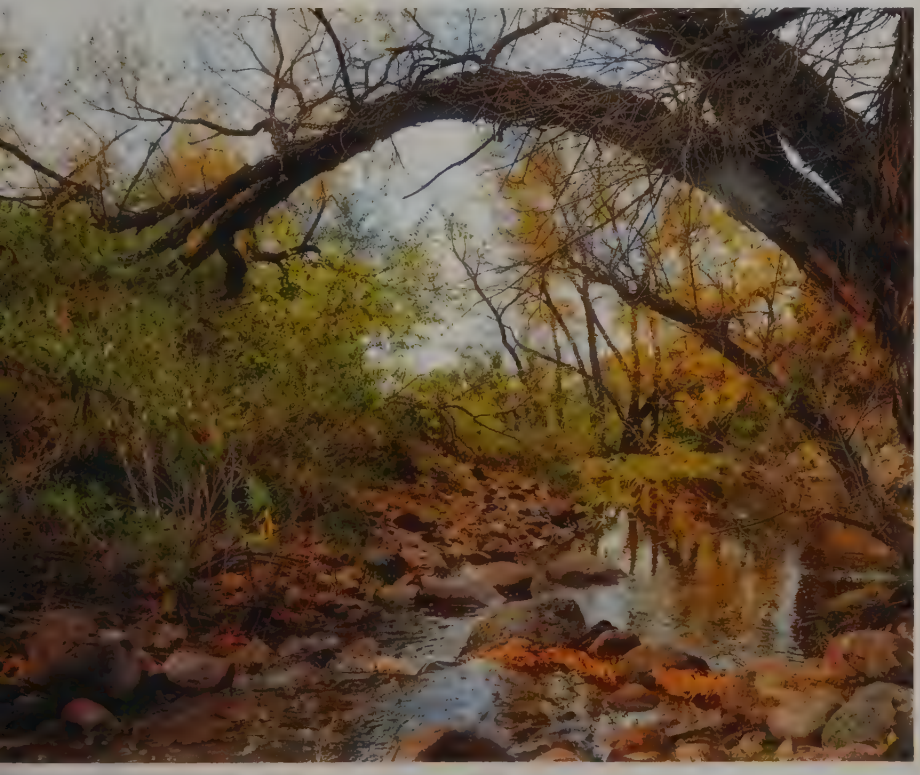
Superstition Wilderness Area

Desert Hackberry
Blooms: Summer

Although the footpaths leading to Hackberry Spring are sometimes obscured by tall grasses, intrepid hikers with a good pair of boots can easily find this favorite hideaway in the Superstition Mountains.

The hike begins on an old dirt road that meanders through an abandoned corral and windmill site before dropping down into the bed of First Water Creek. From there, the route weaves among boulders, tiny stands of trees and reeds full of vociferous, bright red cardinals. Water is sporadic in the canyon, so some creek hopping may be necessary.

Evidence of the area's volcanic origins, as well as the landscape-shaping effects of running water, is showcased in soaring canyon walls, shallow caves scoured out of lava rock and pothole-shaped water tanks. The most scenic part of the hike passes through a slot canyon where shallow, water-carved caves make for fun exploratory side trips. The spring itself is just a rusty pipe that funnels cool water into a quiet pool surrounded by Fremont cottonwoods and, of course, hackberry shrubs. Nearby there's a sandy "beach" with lots of shade and great views as well as many paths-of-use that lead to many points of interest along First Water Creek.



LENGTH: 3 miles round trip

RATING: moderate, some route-finding skills required

ELEVATION: 1,900-2,450 feet

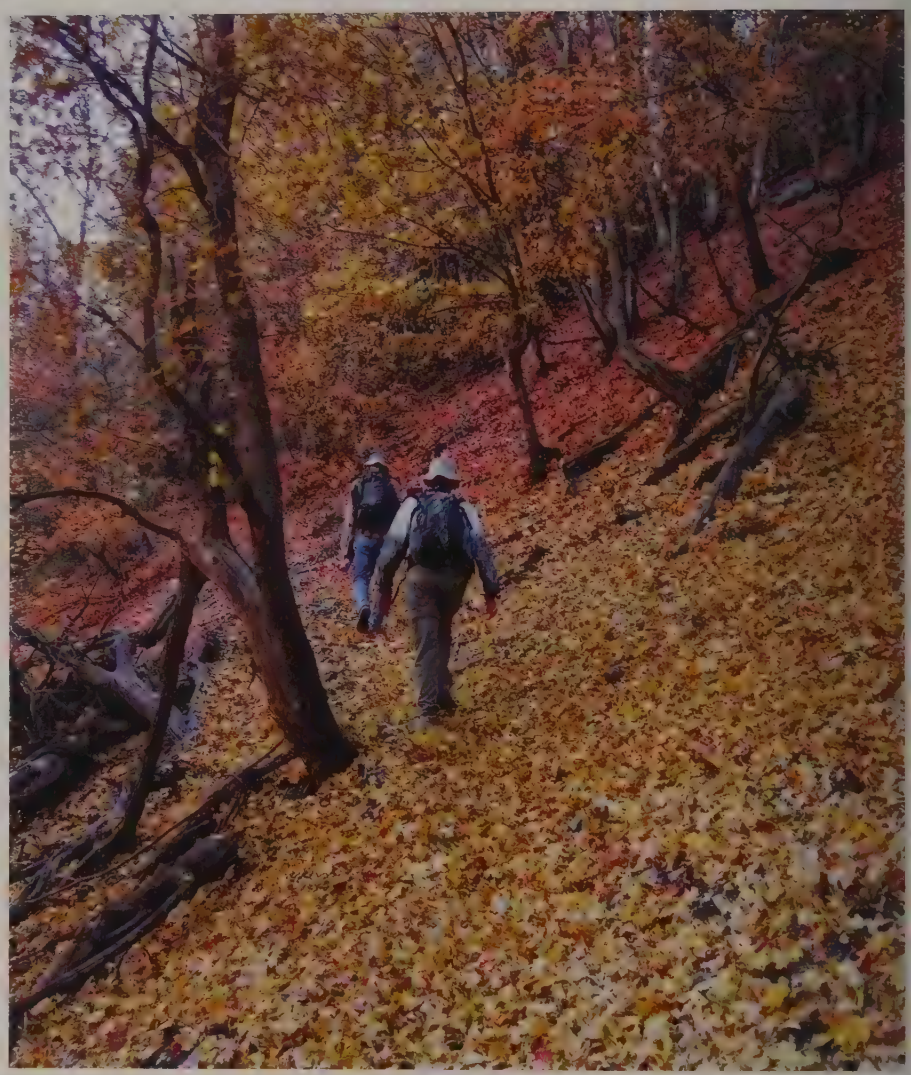
BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restroom, horse staging area

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take U.S. 60 east to the State Route 88 (Idaho Road) exit. Go left and continue on SR 88 (follow the signs leading to Lost Dutchman State Park) to just past the park entrance (between mileposts 201 and 202) and turn right onto First Water Road (Forest Road 78). Follow FR 78 for just over 2 miles to the horse parking lot (NOT the First Water trailhead) on the left and park there. From the lot, hike up FR 78 for 0.1 mile to an unmarked dirt road on the left where there's a closed gate.

Hike Directions: From the FR 78 gate (which is sometimes locked but the area is still open to hikers). Continue down into First Water Canyon and the corral area. From the corral, hike east (straight ahead) along the informal paths that lead to First Water Creek. From the point where the path intersects a bare-rock slot canyon, head north (left) and hike in the creek bed through the canyon. Hackberry Spring is located roughly 1.1 mile from the gate. Return the way you came.



ICEHOUSE CANYON TRAIL

Pinal Mountains, Globe

LENGTH: 10 miles round trip

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 4,520-7,560 feet

FACILITIES: restroom

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take U.S. 60 east to Globe. Follow the "Besh-Ba-Gowah Ruins, Globe Ranger Station" signs through downtown to Icehouse Canyon Road (Forest Road 112). Turn right onto FR 112 and go 4.2 miles to the Icehouse CCC campsite, indicated by a brown sign that says: "197, 192"

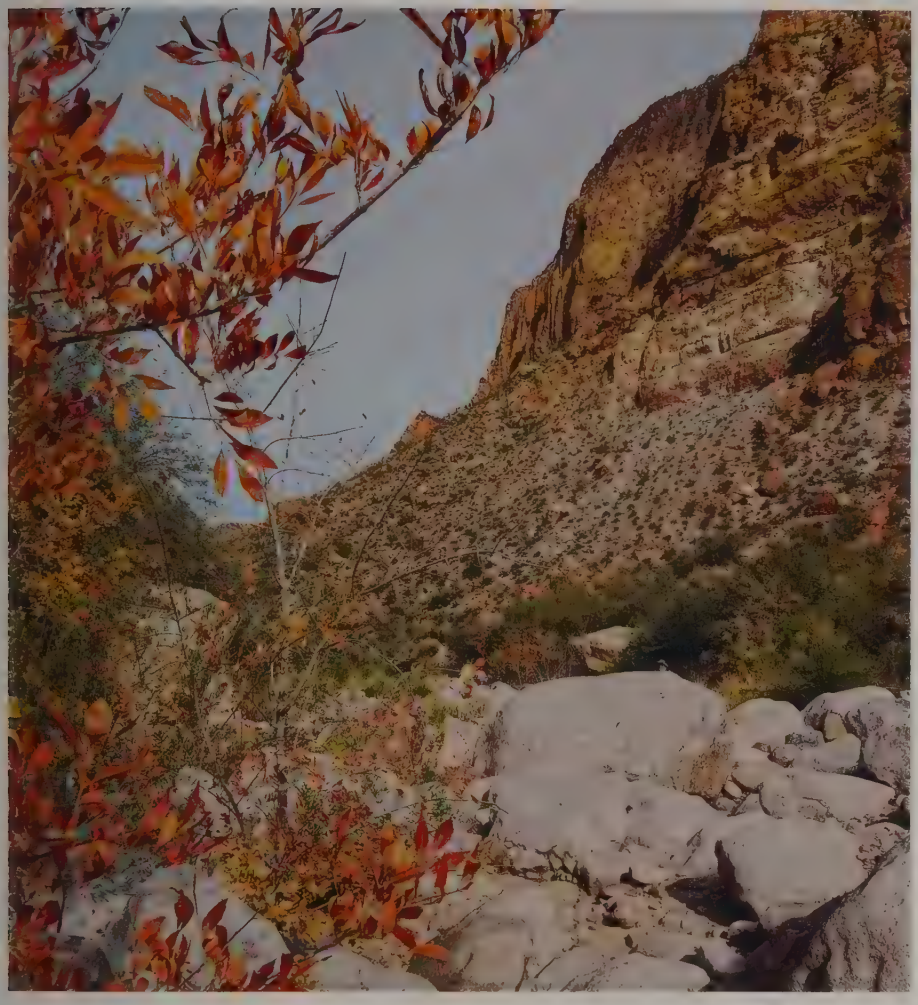
Aspen Leaf

Maple Bigtooth

It's a bit tricky to stay on track, but with some attention to detail, hiking to the cool pockets of aspens and maples high on the slopes of the Pinal Mountains is an exhausting yet memorable adventure.

From the trailhead, hike a short distance uphill along Forest Road 112 to the Telephone Trail on the right. Follow the Telephone Trail for 0.2 mile to the Icehouse Canyon Trail junction, hang a right and go downhill and through a dry wash. Next, pass through a cattle guard and continue up to the top of a rise. From there, go left and follow the road for a half mile to a junction where there are spring-fed water troughs and salt licks for the domestic cattle (and black bears) that inhabit the area. Veer left and continue on the Icehouse Canyon Trail, following the signs to Forest Road 651, the turnaround point for this hike.

To visit Signal Peak (7,812 feet) and Pinal Peak (7,848 feet), continue up the road toward the radio towers and follow the signs.



LaBARGE NARROWS

Superstition Wilderness Area

Not for the novice hiker, this combination hike/cross-country exploration leads to a breathtaking, secluded box canyon with a tiny, riparian ecosystem.

The adventure follows Boulder Canyon Trail 103 along a desert ridge above Canyon Lake Marina to the 2.9-mile point, where the main trail turns right. From there, leave the trail and follow the creek into the canyon. Here, the hike becomes a cross-country boulder scramble. The destination appears as a prominent pyramid-shape outcropping upstream – use that as your guide.

As the route traverses the rugged sycamore- and bear-grass-lined washes, the going gets progressively tougher until, at the entrance to the "narrows," the canyon is choked with massive, quartz-encrusted monoliths. Hikers in good shape will have no trouble picking through the rocks to reach the goal.

Within the towering walls of the narrows, golden velvet ash trees dot the shores of tiny pools like windswept beacons of light. Darting flocks of canyon wrens, chattering cardinals and roosting hawks find food and shelter among the cattails, reeds and willows that feast on the precious waters of LaBarge Creek.

LENGTH: 9.4 miles out and back

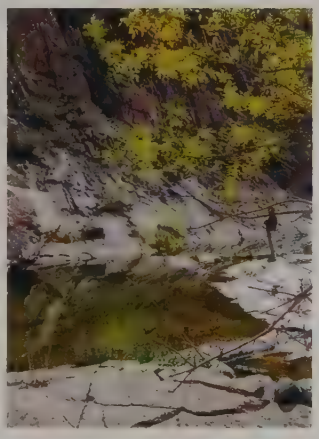
RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 1,600-2,400 feet

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take U.S. 60 east to Apache Junction to the State Route 88 (Idaho Road) exit. Turn left at the off-ramp light and continue on SR 88 for approximately 15 miles to the Canyon Lake Marina between mileposts 210 and 211. Park in the designated trailhead spaces in the east section lot, near the highway. A Tonto Pass is not required. The trail begins at the sign for Boulder Canyon Trail 103 across the road.



LEGENDS OF SUPERIOR TRAILS

Arnett Canyon Segment

"When I first hiked the Legends of Superior Trails, I had no clue how awesome they are," says Mila Besich, mayor of the Town of Superior. "After the hike I felt like crying, but I wasn't sure if it was because of the overwhelming beauty or because I had gone nearly 9 miles."

Speaking at the March 24, 2019, inauguration of the new Legends of Superior Trails (LOST) Arnett Canyon segment, Besich acknowledged the many individuals and organizations that contributed to the planning and construction of the fresh-cut, 1.5-mile trail section that connects with the Arizona Trail at the Picketpost Trailhead off U.S. 60.

While leaders at the Tonto National Forest, Resolution Copper, Arizona Trail Association and the Town of Superior did the governmental and land management red-tape wrangling, young American Conservation Experience workers did much of the shoveling and sweating to build the singletrack path that can be hiked as a loop or a one-way trek to the historic Pinal Townsite, part of the LOST system of interpretive routes that explore the town's history and mining heritage. Although the mountain-bound community sits in the heart of the mineral-rich Copper Corridor just an hour east of Phoenix, where mining is a core industry, Besich is quick to point out that the area's treasures extend beyond its ore. "We're not a mining town. We're a town with a world-class mine," she says.

LENGTH: 1.5-mile loop

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 2,342-2,461 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restroom

GETTING THERE:

Picketpost Trailhead:

From U.S. 60 just before entering the Town of Superior between mileposts 221 and 222, turn right at the Picketpost Trailhead sign. Continue 1 mile to the parking area. Roads are paved and maintained dirt suitable for all vehicles. Trail begins near the host campsite.

Cognizant of the boom-and-bust nature of the mining business, the town ranks its natural outdoor assets as important as any commercial enterprise. The improvement and expansion of the LOST hiking hub is part of its diversification objectives to boost the economy while staying true to its roots. "The project is a marathon," Besich says. "LOST is a start, and we envision Superior becoming home to the next best hiking destination in Arizona."

This ambitious goal includes plans for a 110-mile stacked-loop trail system that will wind through rugged back country and the Queen Creek-Arnett Creek watersheds south of town. The project – which will use the LOST system as an anchor – is currently in the planning and permitting process. If all goes well, construction could begin in the next couple of years. In the meantime, hikers can enjoy the many miles of outstanding existing trails in Superior.

The newly Arnett Canyon Trail segment is a segue to a landscape of amazing biodiversity, history and complex geology. The segment begins with an uphill walk and views of the Superstition Wilderness. Where the route brushes the flanks of Picketpost Mountain, hikers might be inspired to climb to its 4,375-foot summit by way of a sketchy and difficult spur path off the Arizona Trail. At the 0.6-mile point, turn right and pass through a gate to complete the 1.5-mile loop. Or, to extend the hike, continue straight ahead into Arnett Canyon for a drop-dead gorgeous, out-and-back creekside trek flush with greenery and pillars of petrified volcanic ash.

It won't take too many miles of hiking to understand why Besich says this enchanting trail system is "a dream come true" and a key inspiration for the reimagination of a desert town.

MASSACRE GROUNDS

Superstition Wilderness Area

It's curious that even though geologists say that the Superstition Mountains are an unlikely source for rich deposits of gold, myths and legends of finding, losing and raiding the precious mineral in the unforgiving back country persist. From territorial times to the present day, people have been fascinated by the strike-it-rich rumors and tales of ill-gotten gains that ring as loudly and off-key as cymbals in the hands of a restless kid.

Exposure, accidents and violence have claimed the lives of many who followed the lure of greed toward the proverbial mother lode. For those who believe in ghosts, Massacre Grounds is a good place to find them. If you could pick a place to meet your maker, the yucca-studded volcanic mesa surrounded by rolling grasslands, abrupt canyons and sheer cliffs would make for a glorious send-off.

The hauntingly beautiful spot at the far northwestern edge of the Superstition Wilderness near Apache Junction is the site of a legendary 1848 ambush where a group of Spanish miners met their demise at the hands of a band of irate Apaches.

Gory history notwithstanding, Massacre Ground Trail is a real treat to explore. Climbing gently along a well-defined path, the route cuts through the remnants of 35-million-year-old volcanic activity. Contorted lava flows, volcanic necks and rugged washes shaded by desert trees and shrubs complement wide-open views of the surrounding wilderness.

The first mile makes a mild ascent of the foothills at the base of craggy mountains. Acres of chain fruit cholla cover the flats that provide a platform for viewing the Four Peaks on the northern horizon and the colorfully layered mounds of the Goldfield Mountains to the west.

Beyond the wilderness boundary fence, the climbing intensifies as the route swings over the saddle of Hill 2636, a dominant conical butte. From this point, the distant urban profile of Downtown Phoenix is barely visible to the southwest. After a dip into a damp, shady corridor, the trail meets its most difficult challenge – a 0.1-mile slick rock chute. The loose rock and high-steps of this short section look intimidating, but getting through isn't too tough for anybody with nubby footwear and the smarts to take it slow.

With the climbing mostly in the rear view, the final trudge to the massacre site is a breathtaking journey up a sloping mesa to a junction above a precipice that meets a hoodoo-topped wall of stone. To the south, the signature stone pinnacles of Lost Dutchman State Park appear as giant slabs falling away from the massive cliffs that encompass the Massacre Falls. Dark stains on the rock veneer show where waterfalls cascade over the cliffs after heavy rains. A well-worn path to the right heads down the escarpment to the base of the falls. To the left, a slender footpath traces the edge of the mesa's broken brim, culminating at the purported location of the miners' bloody last stand.

Trail's end is a desolate platform at the cusp of sky and stone, with no signs of conflict and no pot of gold. But the site's aura resonates in eerie canyon echoes and the calls of ravens passing overhead.

LENGTH: 6 miles round trip (including side trip to the falls)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,116-3,185 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From U.S. 60 in Apache Junction, take the State Route 88 (Idaho Road) exit 196 and continue 7.5 miles on SR 88 to First Water Road (Forest Road 78) located just past Lost Dutchman State Park on the right. Go 0.5 mile on FR 78 to the signed Crosscut-Massacre Ground Trailhead on the right. FR 78 is rough dirt passable by carefully driven sedans.

PERALTA CANYON

Superstition Wilderness Area

A hike up Peralta Canyon Trail 102 in the Superstition Wilderness just might be the longest 2 miles you'll ever trek.

The hike is an unrelenting uphill slog through desert scrub and slick rock chutes that begins immediately after departing the trailhead and does not quit until the trail tops out at the 2-mile point on the Fremont Saddle. Here, up-close views of Weavers Needle – the area's most recognizable pillar of rock – deliver a generous ROI for the sweaty haul.

The saddle is a popular place to take a break and decide whether to continue hiking downhill another 2.6 miles to the end of trail 102 or backtrack for a 4-miler. Another option involves hiking on well-worn trails to the lone pine tree visible on a ridge to the right (east) of the Needle. This side trip adds 1 mile round-trip. Any way you hike it, Peralta Trail is an ideal way to burn off calories and a terrific place to introduce out-of-town visitors to the beautiful Supes.

LENGTH:

To Fremont Saddle: 4 miles round trip

With side trip to the tree: 5 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,400-3,800 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms

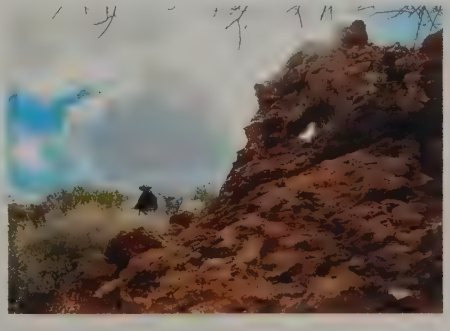
GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take U.S. 60 east to about 8 miles past Apache Junction and look for the "Peralta Trailhead" sign. Turn left onto Peralta Road (Forest Road 77) and drive 8 miles to the trailhead. Note: FR 77 is good dirt and passable by sedan. The parking lot fills up on weekends, so arrive early or park in the overflow lot.

ROUND MOUNTAIN PARK

City of Globe

In Arizona, where the sun shines almost every day, we really love our public recreational lands. Nearly every town with a population over 50 has developed its own trail system. Even places like Globe – which boasts close access to Tonto National Forest and the Arizona Trail – have invested in the Grand Canyon State's obsession with the great outdoors.



The 6.7-mile, six-trail system of Round Mountain Park offers pleasant, family-friendly alternatives to more remote and difficult (think: Sixshooter Canyon and Picketpost Mountain) routes in the "Copper Corridor" mining district. Designed by the University of Arizona Landscape Architecture program in the 1990s, the 386-acre site has been upgraded and expanded by the city, local businesses and volunteers. The well-signed trails wander among boulder-strewn canyons, shallow caves and fascinating geology including a curious hole in a wall of stone known as Bull's Eye Rock. A seating area at the highest point provides 360-degree vistas of the Pinal Mountains and the area's ore pits.

A full complement of amenities including restrooms, water, shaded picnic spots and benches placed at scenic stops along the trails make for a relaxing day of hiking.

LENGTH: 6.7 miles total

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 3,560-4,201 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

FACILITIES: restrooms, visitor center, picnic ramada

GETTING THERE:

From the U.S. 60/State Route 188 junction in Globe, continue 4.8 miles on U.S. 60 to South Street (Round Mountain Park Road). Turn left, go 0.5 mile to the park. South Street is about a quarter of a mile before the U.S. 70 junction.

SILLY MOUNTAIN PARK

Apache Junction

Sandwiched between the U.S. 60 freeway and the rough-cut mountains of the Superstition Wilderness, Silly Mountain Park straddles the worlds of hot pavement and rugged backcountry.

A web of nine trails meander along the mountain's humps, slumps and points of interest, including an old grave site and an abandoned mine. The park is the result of a restoration project funded by public and corporate donations and managed through a partnership between the city of Apache Junction and the Superstition Area Land Trust, a non-profit educational organization created to protect and preserve Arizona State Trust Lands around the southern slopes of the Superstition Mountains.

Until 2008, Silly Mountain was used as an off-road vehicle playground, which took a heavy toll on the terrain. The deterioration of native vegetation and deep trackway scars were becoming an eyesore and a public safety concern. Restoration of the site involved stabilizing trails for long-term sustainability, reestablishing indigenous plants and restricting travel to non-motorized use. The park's most recent addition is a barrier-free, interpretive Botanical Walk that features 280 species of Sonoran Desert plants.

LENGTH: 3.5 miles of trails plus a barrier-free Botanical Walk

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: 1,550-2,139 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: sunrise-sunset

FACILITIES: restroom

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, travel east on U.S. 60 and turn left onto Mountain View Road just past milepost 199. Go 0.3 mile on Mountain View, turn right onto 32nd Avenue and continue 0.2 mile to Silly Mountain Road. Turn right and go 0.4 mile to the trailhead on the left.

Triangle-Leaf Bursage
Blooms: December-April

TONTO CREEK

Tonto National Forest

LENGTH: 4 miles round trip

RATING: moderate-difficult

ELEVATION: 2,607-3,101 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From State Route 87 (Beeline Highway) south of Rye, just past milepost 235, go 3.2 miles south on State Route 188 to the community of Jake's Corner.

Across from Jake's Corner Bar, turn left onto Forest Road 184 (not signed) and continue 0.5 mile to Forest Road 184A (look for utility poles) and park. Roads are paved and sedan-friendly dirt.

Occupying a few dusty acres between nowhere and Roosevelt Lake, the blink-and-you'll-miss-it community of Jake's Corner is a popular waystation for outdoor enthusiasts. Its namesake bar's outwardly ramshackle appearance and come-as-you-are ambiance are big draws for anglers, hunters, boaters, bikers and ATV riders. Sometimes, hikers find the place, too.

Located 22 miles north of the lake along State Route 188 in Gila County, the iconic watering hole is the northern outpost of a string of RV parks, creeky-floor honky-tonks, bait shops and general stores.

The scenic stretch of SR 188 runs through the Tonto Basin, a drainage gorge that separates the wilds of the Mazatzal Wilderness and the Sierra Ancha Mountains. Dozens of creeks and streams in the area flow off the foothills into the major course of Tonto Creek, which feeds Theodore Roosevelt Reservoir.

Although recreation in this hilly, watery backcountry usually involves a motorized vehicle, there are plenty of places to hoof it along dirt roads. Other than the state-traversing Arizona Trail, which makes a grueling climb through the mountainous terrain to the west, there aren't many non-motorized routes nearby unless you go 20 miles north to Payson. But hiking on shared trails can be just as enjoyable with common courtesy.

Directly across from Jake's Corner Bar, a maze of forest roads offer miles of boots-on-the-ground exploratory options. Like the adjacent community, the walkabouts here harbor no pretense. They are simply signed and retain a raw, no-nonsense air. Many of the routes are championed by the Tonto Recreation Alliance, a volunteer organization that works with government agencies to maintain and promote off-highway vehicle access and educate recreators about public access issues in the Tonto National Forest.

One circuit to try is a rough-cut route to Tonto Creek. From a dirt parking area a half mile from the bar, follow Forest Road 184A a few yards, then head left at Forest Road 184D. The first mile is a wobbly trek through wide-open high desert with great views of the Mazatzal Mountains. After a series of dips and climbs on choppy two-tracks, pass a gate at the 1-mile point and hike up to a knoll where a faint road curves to the left. From this high point, head right and continue to the Forest Road 184D/951 junction. Ahead to the left is "hell's half mile."

Primitive FR 951 descends nearly 500 feet, with take-no-prisoners aggression toward the creek. A hiking stick is essential to work through the loose rock and uneven trenches. Expect to pick up some mud and grit on this half-mile plunge. There's no mercy until the messy road meets the sandy edge of Tonto Creek.

Lined with cottonwoods, sycamores and willows, this beautiful bend in the creek features white-capped rapids, calm reflecting pools and optional miles of streamside exploring. Watch for waterfowl and spy the footprints of deer, raccoons and bobcats in sandbars before heading back the way you came.

Short in miles but with an overall elevation change of 917 feet, the effort warrants a post-hike beer and burger reward at Jake's. Dressed in dusty boots and trail garb, you'll blend right in.

VINEYARD TRAIL and ARIZONA TRAIL PASSAGE 20

Tonto National Forest

Desert Globemallow
Blooms: Year-round

LENGTH: 4.5 miles one way

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 2,200-3,700 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

The trailhead is located on the northeast side of the Roosevelt Dam Bridge and can be accessed via State Routes 188 and 88. There are several ways to get there from Phoenix, including the shortest route, a precipitous drive on the rough dirt mountain grades of SR 88. The faint of heart should instead take State Route 87 north to the SR188 junction and head 30 miles south to the trailhead parking turnout at the big Arizona Trail sign on the left just before the bridge. The hike begins across the road at the SR 88 junction sign.

At the north end of Roosevelt Lake, an elegant suspension bridge that straddles the gap between the Superstition Mountains and Four Peaks Wilderness serves as the gateway to Passage 20 of the Arizona Trail.

This 19.5-mile stretch of rugged roads and narrow footpaths shimmies through some of the state's most spectacular country. The old 4.5-mile Vineyard Trail 131 – once used to service a reflector on a pinnacle above the lake – has been harnessed into this section of the AZT's state-traversing course. For a relatively short hike, this one packs a scenic punch. A grueling climb at the start adds satisfaction to the vistas that unfold on the way up. The heart-pumping initial ascent along Inspiration Point tops out at 1.5 miles, with 360-degree views of the lake, Sierra Ancha Mountains and green floodplains of Tonto Basin.

From here, the hike is tempered by rolling grasslands as it moves west toward Four Peaks. Get your camera ready, because the trail curves around a low-slung, saguaro-populated ridge where the Salt River gorge and snaking form of Apache Lake shimmer a thousand feet below. This is one of the prettiest places in Central Arizona.

Beyond the river and lake eye candy, the trail dips though rockfall and cacti to meet Forest Road 429 and the end of trail 131 at the Mills Ridge Trailhead. Backtrack for a 9-mile day hike or continue 469 miles north to Utah on the Arizona Trail.

RIM COUNTRY

Payson

Pine

Strawberry

Forest Lakes

Christopher Creek

Coconino
National Forest

Tonto
National Forest

West Clear Creek
Wilderness Area

High-Country
Trails in the
Pine Forests of
the Mogollon Rim

ARIZONA TRAIL PASSAGE 28 GETS A REBOOT

Coconino National Forest

Once maligned as one of the least satisfying of the Arizona Trail's 43 passages, the Happy Jack segment that runs through pine forests north of C.C. Cragin Reservoir on the Mogollon Rim is getting a do-over. The 29.4-mile passage is being re-routed to move it off forest roads and onto singletrack to improve user experience.

"When the Arizona Trail was originally planned, early trail advocates and land management agencies identified existing trails that could be designated as the Arizona Trail," says Matt Nelson, executive director of the Arizona Trail Association. "Connecting the gaps between existing trails was done by utilizing existing dirt roads." Trail construction filled in gaps.

"The approximately 20 miles on the Coconino National Forest south of Mormon Lake [Happy Jack Passage 28] is a prime example," Nelson continues. "Since the forest contains hundreds of miles of dirt roads, it was easier to use existing roadways and build trail where there wasn't already a 'path.'"

For guidance, Nelson and team looked to the National Scenic Trail Act, which requires National Scenic Trails to be non-motorized and privileges pathways that minimize contact between non-motorized trail users and motorists.

"The Happy Jack Passage has consistently been commented on as the least desirable for AZT users, and receives no day-use hikers, runners or mountain bikers because it's not a pleasant trail experience."

The Happy Jack Singletrack Project seeks to bring the segment up to par. The three-year effort that began in 2018 will result in dramatic changes. So far, several miles of the reroute have been completed, and updated maps are posted on the AZT website (*aztrail.org*). No longer a soul-deadening trudge, the new route is located away from roads. "The improvement in the scenic nature of the trail and the user experience is dramatic," says Arizona Trail Assocation director of trail operations Shawn Redfield.

In addition to the 18 miles of new trail, the project will include kiosks at trailheads, 15 AZT super gates, five bike rollovers, a horse-hitching rail and numerous signs and markers along the new route. The passage will remain open during construction.

"The best thing that could happen to this trail is to get a bunch of [foot] traffic over it as soon as possible to pack it down and harden the surface. If this thru-hiker season and social media 'buzz' is any indication, getting traffic over the new trail is not going to be an issue," Redfield says.

Spotted Coral Root
Blooms: June-July

LENGTH: 29.4 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,733-7,618 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

Hay Meadow Trailhead:

From the State Route 87/260 junction north of Pine-Strawberry, continue 19.5 miles north on SR 87 to Forest Road 138 (signed for Moqui Campground). Turn right and go about 100 yards to the trailhead on the left. Roads are paved up to FR 138. *aztrail.org*

BAKER BUTTE

Coconino National Forest

Western Tanager

LENGTH: 3 miles round trip from Baker Lake or 0.8 mile round trip from the General Crook trailhead

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,430-8,074 feet from Baker Lake or 7,866-8,074 feet from General Crook trailhead

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 28 miles north on SR 87 to Forest Road 300 (Rim Road) located just past milepost 281.

Option 1: Park in the dirt turnouts on Rim Road near Baker Lake just a few yards in from SR 87.

Option 2: Follow FR 300 (make a sharp left at a Y junction at 0.1 mile) 1.2 miles to the Baker Butte Summit Road (FR 300B). There's parking directly across from the summit road in the General Crook trailhead. Forest Road 300 is bumpy dirt, but passable by passenger cars.

A hike up to Baker Butte culminates at an idyllic, pine-shaded pinnacle. Swarms of hummingbirds whip through lilac-scented air and masses of ladybugs cling to trees, shrubs and knee-high wildflowers.

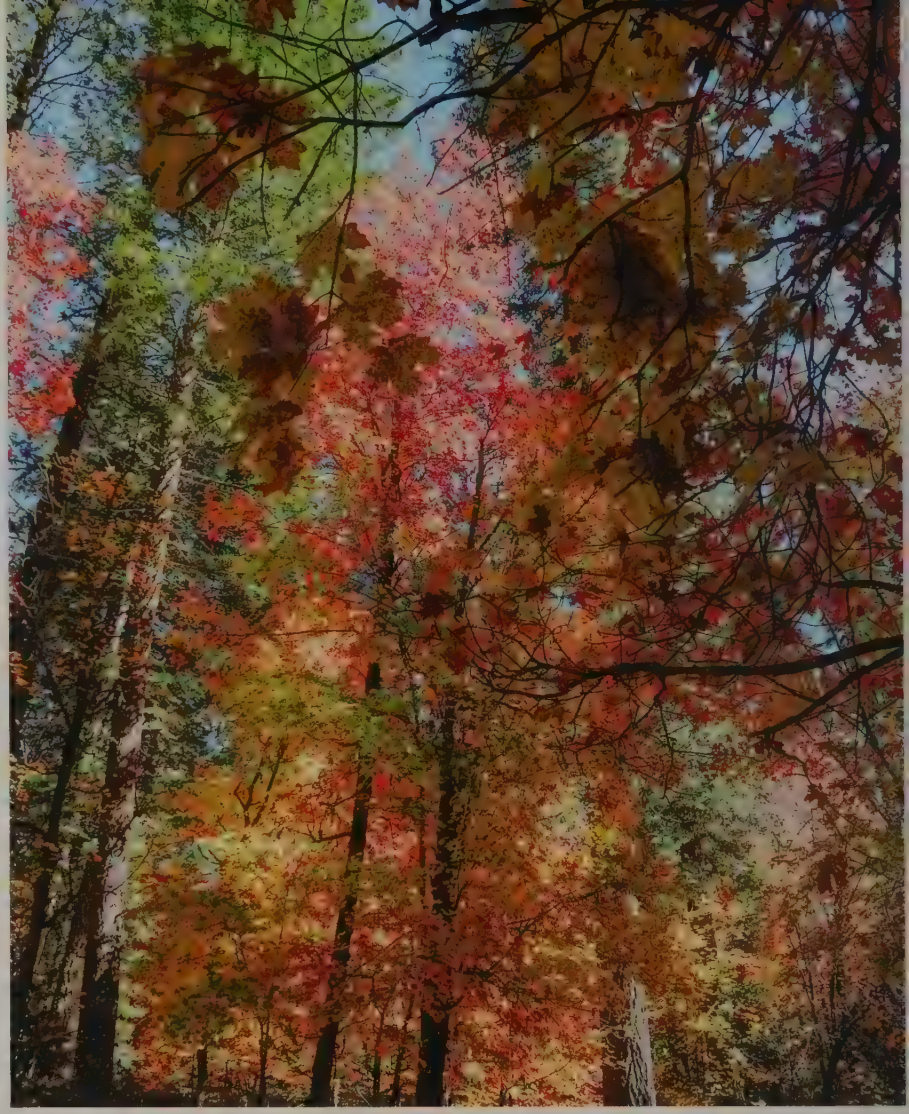
The tower is located near the western edge of Rim Road (Forest Road 300), a 51-mile dirt route that runs between State Route 87 south of Clints Well to State Route 260 near Forest Lakes. Rim Road makes for an iconic scenic drive for anybody with a high-clearance vehicle and the fortitude to endure some queasy, edge-hugging sections.

Of the many Coconino National Forest fire lookout towers that dot the Rim, Baker Butte is one of the easiest to reach on foot. For a moderate 3-miler, park at Baker Lake (usually not more than a soggy bog) at the junction of FR 300 and SR 87. Hike 1.2 miles on FR 300 to Forest Road 300B (the road to the lookout), where there's a parking area for the General Crook Trail. Continue 0.4 mile uphill to the summit. The summit road passes through archways of Gambel oak trees, pines and Douglas firs. Fringed with ferns, raspberry brambles, Canada violets, pine thermopsis, sandwort and wild strawberries, the road twists uphill in long loops landing at the fire tower.

The tower, which earned a spot on the National Historic Lookout Register in 2006, wears its heritage well. Constructed with a not-so-subtle blend of original, repurposed and new building materials, the practical yet homey loft is softened by fire lookout Shirley Payne's collection of quilts, plants and mementos. Neatly arranged instruments, radios, binoculars and maps speak to the intense, sometimes harrowing, work of fire-spotting and coordination of incident response teams – the daily grind of a fire lookout. Payne has worked in the 30-foot-high tower for 23 years (as of 2019) and welcomes visitors when she's not monitoring a fire incident.

The long-gone original tower cabin that was built in 1921 was replaced in 1937 with the present 12-foot-by-12-foot model that's perched on a metal skeleton with wooden stairs. A catwalk was added in 2009, and various upgrades to walls and windows surround a floor covered in speckled, cracked linoleum that smacks of mid-century utilitarianism.

A stroll around the catwalk reveals see-forever vistas. On most days, the peaks of Flagstaff, Williams and the White Mountains can be seen with the naked eye standing over seas of ponderosa pines. On the best days, Picacho Peak and Mount Lemmon in Tucson show their silhouettes 200 miles to the south.



LENGTH: 8.7 miles (as described here)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,120-7,598 feet

BEST SEASON: mid-October, to see fall color

GETTING THERE:

From Payson, go 29 miles east on State Route 260 to Rim Road (Forest Road 300 at the Woods Canyon Lake sign). Turn left and go 22.8 miles on FR 300 to FR137, turn right and continue 3.4 miles to the Barbershop Trail sign. Hike begins on the west side of the road at a small wooden sign. Dirt roads are sedan-friendly.

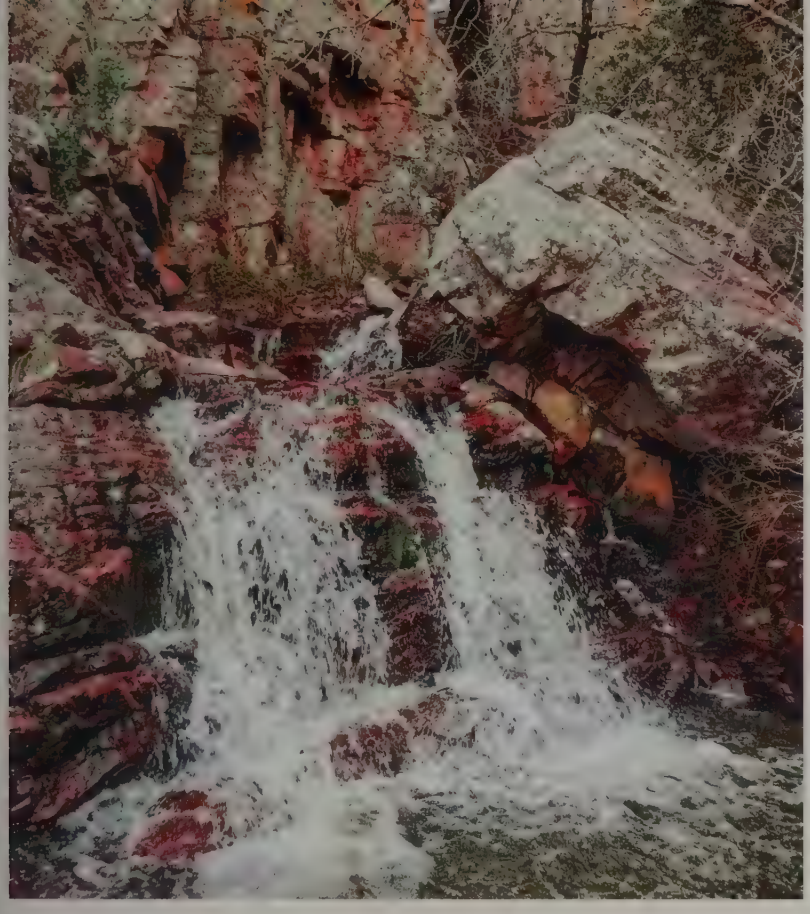
Lupine
Blooms: Spring-Summer

BARBERSHOP TRAIL

Coconino National Forest

One of the best long hikes on the Mogollon Rim is the Cabin Loop System. Several trailheads provide myriad options for making multi-day backpack treks or day hikes using the five trails that link a system of abandoned fire lookout cabins. In autumn, the Barbershop Trail portion of the route is famous for its awesome display of colorful foliage.

The hike begins with a steep descent into Yeager Canyon, a creek crossing and an immediate climb back up to a ridge. The trail is sketchy in places, but is marked by tree blazes. Along this section, moist pockets of bigtooth maples form canopies of red, orange and gold over a moss-fleeced, pine-fir woodland. At the 0.7-mile point, turn right to pick up the U-Bar Trail. Deeply wooded, this trail features Gambel oaks and aspen groves that shine in electric yellow in mid-October. The ruins of Dane Cabin and its companion spring appear at mile 2.3 before the trail winds north along the edge of Dane Canyon. Soon, the path dips into the gorge via a series of switchbacks, landing hikers in a stream-bisected meadow at the 4.3-mile point – a good turnaround point for a leaf-peeping day hike.



BARNHARDT TRAIL

Mazatzal Wilderness Area

Waterfalls in the desert might sound incongruous, but with a healthy dose of winter snow and mild spring temperatures, the remote peaks and canyons of the Mazatzal Wilderness Area put on amazing waterworks.

One of the best ways to observe raging runoff and tiered seasonal waterfalls is to hike the Barnhardt Trail about 20 miles south of Payson.

Although conditions vary depending on precipitation, March through early April is peak season for snowmelt waterfalls. In addition to its spectacular display of cascades, the totally canyon-bound route zigzags through a complicated stew of geological delights including some spectacular "chevron folds" – accordion-style bends in the canyon wall created by millions of years of tectonic forces. Also look for "fossil" waves in pinkish stone slabs that line the route. These ripples are either preserved ocean-bottom wave action or fingerprints of currents of shallow rivulets.

LENGTH: 6.5 miles round trip to the grotto and back

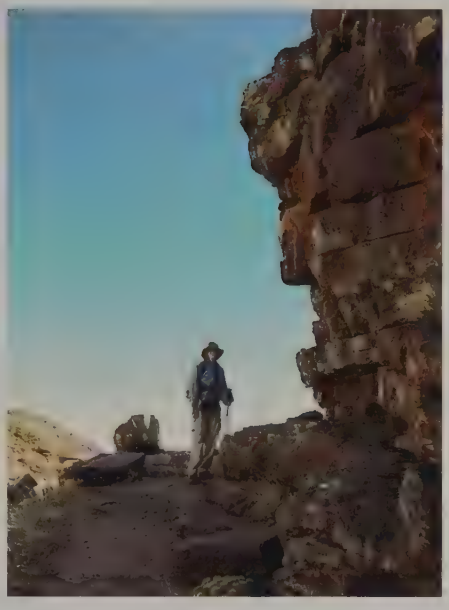
RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,210-5,580 feet

BEST SEASON: March-April

GETTING THERE:

From Shea Boulevard and State Route 87 (Beeline Highway) in Fountain Hills, travel 51 miles north on SR 87 to Forest Road 419. This road is located just beyond the sign for Barnhardt Trailhead and roughly 0.25 mile south of the town of Gisela. Turn left and go 4.8 miles on FR 419 to the trailhead. FR 419 is a rutted one-lane track. Although sedans are frequently sighted at the trailhead, a high-clearance vehicle is recommended.



Throughout the hike, outcroppings of blunt quartzite and dragon-scale-like shale are drenched by trickling springs, puddles of melted ice and roaring cascades of water plunging 2,000 feet over rough-cut cliffs. Several stony ledges along the way offer excellent views of water flowing at the bottom of the canyon and wildly contorted rock formations. A particularly grand vista can be seen at a the 2.8-mile point, where a natural rock shelter embellished with clumps of pincushion cactus teeters above a vertical drop with big views of the Mogollon Rim.

Although the trail runs for 6 miles one way, many hikers prefer a shorter trip that ends at an easy-to-miss slot canyon with a triple-tiered waterfall. This star attraction of the hike is not visible from the trail. To get to it, pay attention at the 3.14-mile point, where water spills over the trail from behind a vertical wall of stone. The deafening sound of the falls slamming over slickrock confirm the location of the hidden grotto. You'll need good traction, balance and determination to scramble over slippery rocks and work your way around puddles to get to the ledges below the falls. The extra work pays off with a memorable shower of icy spray, crystalline chutes and churning plunge pools in a tiny box canyon.

BEARFOOT TRAIL

Tonto National Forest, Pine-Strawberry

Officially introduced in May 2014 during Pine-Strawberry Trail Days festivities, this hiking path ascends the craggy canyons below the Mogollon Rim to connect with the Pine Canyon Trail 26.

The hike takes off from a small pullout along State Route 87 and follows a ridgeline above the town of Pine. From the trailhead, pass the gate, veer right and hike 0.2 mile on the power line road to a four-way junction where the road gets steep. Pick up the trail heading right. While hiking, note the beautifully constructed native stone retaining walls and drainage ditches. The din of the highway accompanies outstanding views of the Mazatzal Mountains for the first mile, but the noise recedes as the trail curves to the northwest, dipping and climbing among cypress pockets, juniper-studded gullies and pine-shaded woodlands backed by Mogollon Rim vistas. You'll pass several private residential communities and Camp Lo Mia before connecting with Trail 26 in Pine Canyon.

For a longer trek, continue 8 miles on Trail 26 to Rim Road for rim-top vistas.

Fluffy Prairie Clover
Blooms April-October

○ ◆

LENGTH: 5.6 miles one way (9.6 miles one way with Pine Canyon)

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: 5,690-6,050 feet (5,000-7,200 feet with Pine Canyon Trail)

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 20 miles north on SR 87 to the trailhead at milepost 270 on the right.

CANYON CREEK

Tonto National Forest

Issuing from the base of the Mogollon Rim, Canyon Creek is a top Arizona fishing and hiking destination. Back in 2002, the Rodeo-Chedeski fire torched parts of the forests surrounding this beautiful perennial stream while leaving other sections intact. Since the fire swept through, the forest service, Arizona Game & Fish Department and other agencies have been working to restore and stabilize the waterway.

Vegetation has been replanted, and fencing keeps resident wildlife from browsing sensitive saplings. In between the blackened trunks and barren knolls, pockets of lush pines, alders, locusts and willows frame sprawling green pastures that burst with color in summer wildflower season (May-September).

The hike is a combination of streamside walks, meadow strolls and – where the brambles are too thick to stay near the water – adjacent Forest Road 188 serves as a detour. Beginning at Airplane Flat campground (which was untouched by the fire) the hike portal is a wooden gate near campsite 10. Narrow paths blazed by anglers head toward the water and sometimes are obscured by brush and dead tree fall.

At roughly 1.25 miles, OW Bridge leads to a private ranch. Here, informative signs with maps, fishing rules and insight into the creek restoration project mark a popular stop for anglers trying for coveted brown trout. Continue hiking south along the stream – there's no definitive way to go, just head in the direction of the the water, crossing back and forth at low flow points or on primitive log "bridges." Expect wet feet if you really want to get the most out of this trek.

Numerous signs along the road herald additional access points, and you'll probably run into people fishing along the banks on your way to the 5-mile point where the trail ends at White Mountain Apache Tribe land.

LENGTH: 5 miles one way

RATING: easy (some route-finding)

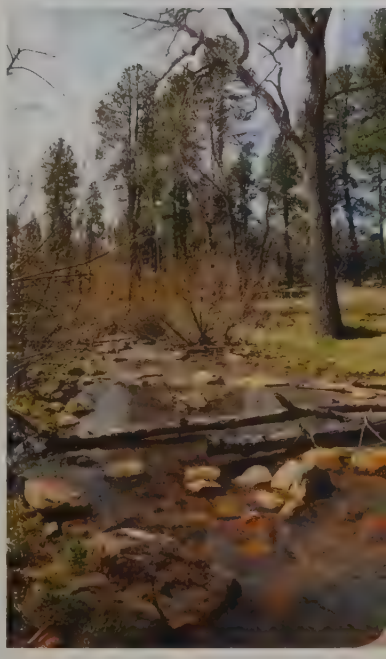
ELEVATION: 6,200-6,600 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: outhouses, campsites, site host in season, picnic tables

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 32 miles east (right) on SR 260 to Young Road (Forest Road 512) between mileposts 284-285. Turn south (right) and go 3 miles to Forest Road 33 (Canyon Creek Recreation Area) located just past milepost 330. Turn left and go 5 miles on FR33 to Airplane Flat campground. The last 5 miles are on a winding, precipitous, but good dirt road suitable for sedans in dry weather. Do not park in designated campsites—use the dirt turnouts.



Yellow Iris
Blooms: Spring

CARR LAKE TRAIL SYSTEM

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

LENGTH: 9.7-mile loop

RATING: easy hiking, difficult route-finding

ELEVATION: 7,105-7,881 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restroom

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 29 miles east on SR 260 to Rim Road (Forest Road 300, signed for Woods Canyon Lake). Turn left, go 5.2 miles and turn left at the Carr Trailhead sign (Forest Road 9350) and continue 0.1 mile to the trailhead.

Finding your way around the Carr Lake Trail System near Woods Canyon Lake on the Mogollon Rim is not for the directionally challenged. There are a bunch of brain-boggling signs on the trails. Although the directional markers are somewhat standard in design, their placement can be befuddling. The trail emblems on the Aspen 411, Carr Lake 412, Boulder Hop 413 and General Crook 140 trails merely indicate where you are instead of where you should go.

Forest Service maps of the area are helpful, but don't include the complete lay of the land or distances. It's smart to use GPS, map and compass to stay on track. For experienced, well-equipped hikers, though, getting around the Carr Lake System isn't too difficult. The routes are tagged with diamond- or chevron-shaped tree markers and most (but not all) junctions are well-signed.

Sego Lily
Blooms: May-July

With sound preparation, exploring the coniferous woodlands and wildflower-splattered meadows of this high-country hiking hub is worth the extra effort.

Here's a narrative for one long loop option using the Aspen and General Crook Trails:

From the "ABC" sign at the trailhead, hike 0.2 mile to the General Crook 140/Aspen 411 junction. This is the beginning and end spot for the loop. Go right on 411. At 1.3 miles, where the Boulder Hop Trail 413 goes left, continue straight ahead on trail 411. Tricky move: Where the trail meets an unsigned road at mile 1.7, turn left, hike a few yards and pick up the faint trail on the left. At the 2.5-mile point, there's a sign marking the junction with Carr Lake Trail 412. (This is a good turnaround point for a casual day hike.)

Go right and follow the trail (it transitions into a primitive two-track road) to the 3.1-mile point, where signposts mark a sharp left turn. At 5.7 miles, make another hard left at a somewhat confusing double-arrow tree marker. The General Crook Trail 140 junction appears at the 6.3-mile point and is marked by white chevrons tacked to trees.

From this point, continue hiking straight ahead following the chevrons. Over the next 3.4 miles, you'll encounter five more signed junctions – just follow General Crook back to the trailhead.

CEDAR MESA
Tonto National Forest

Cedar Mesa is the kind of place you don't just stumble upon. The desolate, flattop spread resides at the end of a ridiculously undulating road at the base of the Mogollon Rim south of the community of Pine.

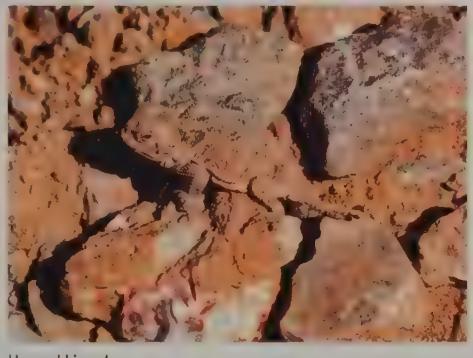
It takes effort to get to it, but the payoff is a pleasant, uncrowded diversion from the old standard hikes in the area. The hike follows Forest Road 322, which begins at a dirt pullout along the heavily traveled Control Road (Forest Road 64) near where numerous trailheads and cliff-climbing routes provide connectivity with major travel corridors. The road is an easy snare for curious hikers wondering where the heck it goes.

Open to both motorized and foot travel alike, the rough dirt two-track in Tonto National Forest reveals its colors immediately with a steep ascent to a crest where visitors are treated to the first set of magnificent views and a welcome breath-catching moment. The hike's ubiquitous landform is the imposing rock jetty of Milk Ranch Point, which towers over 7,400 feet. Patches of vivid green foliage clinging to its escarpments expose the locations of Red Rock and Pine springs, reliable water sources along Highline Trail, which is part of the state-traversing Arizona Trail.

From here, the climb continues on a milder slope, gradually exposing bigger and better vistas of the Mogollon Rim, a wall of uplifted rock that spans roughly 200 miles from New Mexico to the Sedona area. Although the difference between the hike's high and low points is only 358 feet, the out-and-back route's constant ups and downs add up to more than 1,000 feet of elevation change. As the road moves southeast through forests of cypress, pinion pine and a fringe of manzanita, the peaks of the Mazatzal Mountains appear as hazy purple mounds on the western horizon. At the 1.2-mile point, the route heads left at a three-way junction. The road narrows as it descends through a rocky corridor with scrub oak, alligator junipers and ponderosa pines. This is where the first good glimpses of the destination come into view – a low-slung mesa fleeced in conifers with three quad-burning dip-and-climbs in between.

From here, Payson Municipal Airport, a brush pit and the chiseled watershed of the East Verde River and its tributaries are visible to the south. Over the last hump, the trail emerges on Cedar Mesa proper, with a gate at the 2.6-mile point.

Although the road disappears beyond the fence, it's possible to extend the hike by exploring the irregularly shaped mesa that's just over a mile across. Vegetation on the sparse, breezy plateau is a homogeneous labyrinth of junipers, so a good sense of direction or GPS skills are essential to avoid getting lost. An easy way to wander and stay found is to follow the barbed-wire fence that encloses the summit for more spectacular Rim views from a seldom-visited, hard-won platform.



Horned Lizard

LENGTH: 5.2 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,495-5,853 feet (1,183 feet of accumulated elevation change)

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, go 12 miles north on SR 87 to milepost 265 (2 miles north of Tonto Natural Bridge State Park), turn right on Control Road (Forest Road 64) and continue 0.8 mile to the parking pullout at Forest Road 322.

CHEVELON CANYON: CHEVELON CROSSING

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

A seasoned hiker once described the trip through Chevelon Canyon on the Mogollon Rim as a "cross the creek and cross your fingers" venture.

This spot-on assessment is a playful nod to the dozens of creek crossings, overgrown willows, logjams and befuddling, boulder-clogged bends that make route-finding a challenge. Therefore, navigating the steep-walled, twisted watercourse from Chevelon Crossing to the dam at Chevelon Canyon Lake is a trip only experienced hikers should attempt.

Sporadic rock cairns belie clues where the primitive trail cuts through thick vegetation or was taken out by floods. As a general rule, if you find yourself getting very high on the canyon walls or disoriented, backtrack, cross the creek and hunt for signs of a passage. For attentive hikers, the trail-muddling obstacles are but an inconvenience in an otherwise beautiful gorge of vertical limestone cliffs, flowing stream channels and refreshing pools. Within the moist riparian corridor at the bottom of the canyon, ponderosa pines, alders and Gambel oaks (think: fall foliage hike) provide plenty of cool shade, but just a few yards up from the stream, drier pinon-juniper grasslands speckled with cacti can be quite warm in summer.

Trekkers planning a through hike should come prepared with map, GPS and plenty of supplies, as the 8.5-mile trip is slow going. For those out for a day hike, the way is relatively simple before the head-scratching begins around 2 miles in. Finding the start point is also tricky.

Here's how: At the Long Draw North trailhead, where the dirt road splits just past the restrooms, walk down the left fork for about 20 yards to a campsite with a picnic table. Where the road makes a sharp right turn going uphill, look for an unmarked path on the left heading toward the creek.

◆◆

LENGTH: 8.5 miles one way

RATING: experienced hikers only

ELEVATION: 6,300-6,100 feet

BEST SEASON: September-October, May-June

FACILITIES: restrooms, campsites, picnic tables

GETTING THERE:

From Payson, go 29 miles east on State Route 260 to Rim Road (Forest Road 300 at the Woods Canyon Lake sign). Turn left and go 8.3 miles on FR300, turn right on Forest Road 169 and go 20.3 miles to Forest Road 504. Turn right and drive 1.4 miles to the turnoff on the right for Chevelon Crossing Campground. Forest Roads are sedan-friendly dirt, but there are steep drop-offs and hairpin turns on FR 504.

Canyon Grape
Blooms: April-July
Fruits: Late Summer

CHEVELON CANYON: TELEPHONE RIDGE

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

LENGTH: 1.25 miles one way on trail

RATING: moderate-difficult

ELEVATION: 6,450-7,225 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Payson, go 29 miles east on State Route 260 to Rim Road (Forest Road 300, signed for Woods Canyon Lake). Turn left and continue 8.4 miles to FR 169, turn right and go 7.4 miles to FR 119. Follow FR 119 1.5 miles to the FR 180 junction. From here, the road degrades into a very rough, narrow two-track suitable only for high-clearance vehicles. At this point, you can park in the turnouts and hike, or carefully drive the last 1.5 miles on FR 119 to the trailhead.

It's a long, dizzying hike from the top of Telephone Ridge down to Chevelon Creek. The 1.25-mile, cliff-hugging trail plunges 700 feet to reach the pristine waterway coveted by anglers and beloved by hikers seeking solitude in this otherwise congested area of the Mogollon Rim south of Chevelon Canyon Lake.

Although Telephone Ridge Trail 103 was built only as a path from the rim to the creek, it's possible to continue hiking up or downstream. Just follow the water and be prepared for creek crossings. Even if all you do is trek down trail 103 to the creek and back, the trip is a satisfying adventure.

Not recommended for the directionally challenged or the timid, the narrow route snakes down the canyon wall through a mix of pine-oak woodlands and precariously exposed ridges. In some spots, social trails leave the true route heading straight down the cliffs. The official trail

makes much safer, long climb turns, so if you find yourself going dangerously vertical, backtrack and scope out the better (and more sustainable) path.

At the bottom of Chevelon Canyon, a field of deadfall from an old wildfire obscures the trail, so make a mental note of your entry point before exploring the patches of open meadows, willow-cluttered bogs and deep pools along the creek.

CHILDRESS TANK-SHOOFLY VILLAGE

Tonto National Forest

What do you do when you want to take friends or family with young kids or mobility issues on a hike but still want to get in a good workout? The answer might be found on dirt roads that spiral off the short, barrier-free trails that cater to the "hiking lite" crowd. One such place is the Shoofly Village Ruins north of Payson.

An excellent go-to destination for introducing non-trekkers to the history and beauty that lies beneath the Mogollon Rim, the site offers an approachable, intriguing way to get outdoors without the preparations needed for more remote or wilderness hikes. All you need for gear is stable footwear, sun protection and a bottle of water. The self-guided tour is outfitted with interpretive signs describing dozens of excavated ruins of a Native American community that was occupied between 1000-1250 A.D.

Although walking the roughly quarter mile of easy trails is a satisfying stand-alone experience, those who want to extend the hike can step out on adjacent Forest Road 1164 to add a refreshing 3.2 miles to the ruins hike.

Although it's too rocky for those without good balance or proper gear, the road can be a fun diversion for adults and energetic kids. Also known as Childress Tank Road, the rugged two-track swoops through the juniper scrublands of Houston Mesa and Walnut Flat with unobstructed views of the Rim, foothills and rolling grasslands. To find this road, hike north from the parking lot and follow the wide dirt path to a barbed wire fence. Pass the gate and continue down the main course (go straight) to the Forest Road 1163/1164 junction. Turn right, hike 1 mile, take either fork at the FR 1167 junction and head toward the earthen berm of Childress Tank.

The hike has lots of interesting sights to keep antsy young ones engaged. Wildflowers, scurrying wildlife and continually changing terrain put the kibosh on boredom. The road ends at the stock tank, where a muddy fringe of animal tracks inspires detective work. The outdoor classroom is a fun place to identify prints that include elk, bobcat, skunk, deer, raccoon, coyote, domestic cattle and dogs.

The quick out-and-back trek satisfies the urge for an extra leg stretch while non-hikers can hang out at the trailhead to sketch, picnic or catch up on reading. It's an outing that everybody can enjoy on their own terms.

LENGTH: 3.2 miles round trip (4 miles with the ruins tour)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 5,075-5,263 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 87/26 junction in Payson, go 2 miles north on SR87 to Houston Mesa Road (Forest Road 199). Turn right and continue 2.8 miles to the Shoofly Village Ruins turnoff and follow the access road to the trailhead. Roads are 100 percent paved.

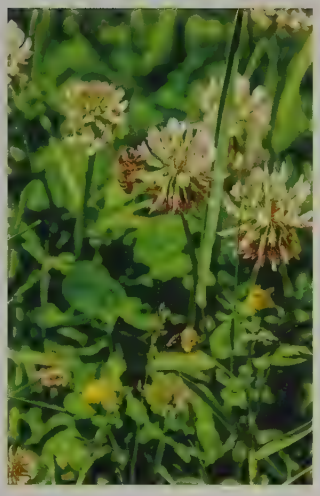
Southwestern Lewisia
Blooms: February-June

CLOVER CREEK

West Clear Creek Wilderness Area

A tributary of West Clear Creek, Clover Creek trickles through a pristine green canyon on the Mogollon Rim. The route is a primitive path weaving back and forth across the shallow stream as it drifts through berry-laden brambles, willows and alders. When warmed by the sun (or trampled by the resident cattle), meadows of clover exhale an earthy-sweet perfume into the air, soothing the senses and attracting swarms of pollinators.

To add physical challenge to this otherwise effortless hike, a campfire-stained cave tucked high into the canyon wall makes a short but steep side trip. This seldom-visited area was recently selected for "wilderness rehabilitation," which means several old roads were blocked off to allow the riparian vegetation to recover. So, when visiting this verdant canyon, be sure to tread lightly, leave what you find and yield the right of way to native wildlife and resurgent vegetation.



White Clover
Blooms: April-October

LENGTH: 5 miles roundtrip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,700-6,800 feet

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, go north on SR 87 to milepost 285, where you'll see a small parking lot and a series of Forest Service signs in a meadow. Turn left onto Forest Road 142, set your odometer and drive 0.5 mile to an unmarked road on the right. This is easy to miss – look for a sign that reads "No Trailers, Dead End." Do not take FR 611. Stay right. Continue on the unmarked road for 0.6 mile to the trailhead marked by a brown metal cattle gate and a sign that reads "Closed to All Vehicles." Go through (or around/under) the gate and follow the informal footpaths along the water. When you get to the ruins of an old bridge/dam, veer left and follow the creek as far as you'd like.

COLONEL DEVIN TRAIL

Tonto National Forest

LENGTH: 2 miles one way

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 6,097-7,280 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

Washington Park Trailhead:

From Payson, go 1.7 miles north on State Route 87 to Houston Mesa Road (Forest Road 199), turn right and continue 10 miles to the "T" intersection at Control Road (FR 64) in the Whispering Pines community. Turn left, go 0.6 mile and take a right on FR 32. Go 3.2 miles to FR 32A (sometimes signed as Belluzzi Boulevard), turn right and continue 1 mile to the trailhead. From the big Arizona Trail sign, cross the bridge, head left and go right at the trail 290 sign. Roads are maintained dirt suitable for all vehicles.

For casual travelers, the East Verde River is synonymous with water play destinations along Houston Mesa Road north of Payson. The Water Wheel, First, Second and Third Crossing recreation sites offer walk-up access to the canyon-bound water course. A tributary of the mighty Verde River, the slim waterway begins as trickling springs that emanate from rugged escarpments below the Mogollon Rim.

The river's enchanting watershed area can be explored by way of the Colonel Devin Trail 290 that follows its course from Washington Park to the springs that feed it.

Named for Colonel Thomas C. Devin, who used the route for military endeavors in the 1880s, the dirt trail that alternates between a rutted two-track and slender path also makes up the last 2 miles of Highline Passage 26 of the Arizona Trail.

The route's proximity to the river and its drainages makes for a shady trek best done in fall or spring, when water levels peak and foliage is at its most beautiful.

Although the forest service rates this hike as difficult, just about anybody can manage the first mile. Adding to the hike's many natural attractions, the trail is bookended with tributes to the area's human history. At the Washington Park trailhead, the hike begins at an informational kiosk with plaques that describe past military operations, pioneers and economic development.

Take a moment to read the posters to gain an appreciation for the storied past of the territory you're about to walk through. Beyond the kiosk, the path crosses the first of four bridges – two metal spanners constructed by the Arizona Trail Association and two split-log catwalks – that take the jump out of creek crossings.

Tracing the waterway through forests of mixed conifers, maples, boxelders, Gambel oaks and an understory of canyon grapevines and blooming shrubs, the first segment of the hike is a not-too-difficult, visual delight. The sound of waterfalls and cascading rivulets adds a pleasant soundtrack to this leafy stroll. One mile from the trailhead, the route merges with the decommissioned military road and begins its 1,000-foot climb to the top of the Mogollon Rim.

The next half mile is defined by a moderate ascent on the banks above the river, where dribbling feeder streams and spring water tumble down to join the main channel. Where water glides across the trail, a smattering of aspens and Arizona sycamores sprout from moist soils and sandy washes.

The demanding work begins where the trail makes a sharp right at the Tunnel Trail 390 junction. Enter the elephant in the room: Railroad Tunnel. An optional quarter-mile, difficult side trip to a much-hyped, graffiti-spoiled excavation site can be an interesting diversion for history buffs and hikers who enjoy an off-the-wall experience. The final ascent up to Rim Road (Forest Road 300) creeps up a steep, rocky bench passing by some of the springs and seeps that are the source of the East Verde River. These inconspicuous trickles eventually funnel into the Verde and Salt rivers that converge more than 100 miles south just a few miles east of Phoenix.

Major climbing ends at a pair of trail signs just below the road. Although the great views here might make for a satisfying turnaround point, the hike ends a few steps farther up the road at the Battle of Big Dry Wash historical monument. It marks an 1882 clash between the U.S. Army and the Apache Tribe. Use this bookend to a scenic and historically significant trek to either double back or continue north on the Blue Ridge Passage of the Arizona Trail.

CYPRESS-BOULDERS LOOP

Payson Area Trails System

The seasons of spring and fall share a common, landscape-transforming magic. While autumn is famous for painting the Arizona high country in warm, fiery hues, spring brings a rush of "pop-up" snowmelt rivers to our deserts.

March and April are the best months to view the transient waterworks in the Payson area. There's still enough snow on the peaks and hiding in shady canyons to keep ravines and gullies flowing, but it doesn't last long. Located close to town in a surprisingly untamed terrain of weathered granite dells and abrupt mini canyons, the Cypress-Boulders Loop is an ideal place to experience runoff.

The Payson Area Trails System route is open to hikers, equestrians, bikes and ATVs, and thus sees lots of action. In early spring, running water carves rivulets in sandy washes and miniature falls that cascade over bare rock. Forests of pines, junipers and cypress trees mixed in with open, boulder-studded fields form a patchwork of shade and sun along the route. Although this hike would be pretty any time of year, cool temperatures and rare water make it exceptional in spring.

LENGTH: 7.3 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,485-4,932 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, go right and follow SR 260 less than a mile to Granite Dells Road on the right. Go 1.9 miles on Granite Dells to a small, easy-to-miss sign for Cypress Trail. Park along the road. Be mindful of the private driveways in the area.

Alternate southern access to the loop:

Go 3.3 miles on Granite Dells Road (which will turn into Forest Road 435 after 1.3 miles) and park at the Monument Peak trailhead on the left just before a roadblock. From here, hike down to the roadblock on FR 435 and hike 0.5 mile (crossing three concrete bridges) to the Boulder Loop trailhead. Look for a sign on the cliff wall on the left. The trail begins on the dirt road heading downhill to the right. Note: From the first P.A.T.S. sign above the gorge, the trail continues directly across the gorge. You can see the signs high on the opposite embankment.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

From the trailhead, follow Cypress Trail 2.5 miles to the junction for Boulders Trail. Take either the north or south leg and hike the 2.7-mile loop back to this junction, then retrace your steps back to the trailhead.

DIRTYNECK CANYON

Coconino National Forest

At some point in history, somebody must have emerged from this canyon with a dirty neck. Whether it was a shepherd or a reclusive homesteader, a case of ring-around-the-collar would have been a small price to pay to live and work in this paradise on the Mogollon Rim.

Although it's shown on forest maps, there's no official hiking trail through the shallow canyon. The route briefly follows a two-track road that merges with footpaths and game trails before being swallowed up in organic mass, leaving trekkers to rely on creative route-finding to get through.

The landscape diversity here is a wonder. As the canyon winds north from Forest Road 613 to State Route 87 just south of Clints Well, it cuts through moist fern gullies fed by the trickling waters of Windfall Spring and elegantly swaying thickets of oaks and locusts. Limestone boulders strewn across a tree-barren, yawning gorge share emerald meadows speckled with wild geraniums, yarrows and clovers. Decades of snowfalls and summer rains have soothed the scars of the wildfire that consumed the trees. Here, the canyon comes to a fork. Head right into an unscathed pine forest and the beginning of the muddy boots portion of the hike. Spring water and monsoon runoff settle in rivulets and tiny reflecting pools at the base of the canyon, forming a nourishing foundation for plant and animal survival. Each footstep releases pungent, musty, earthy aromas sometimes spiked with head-clearing jolts of wild mint. Surrounded by shoulder-high sunflowers, a canopy of whispering aspens and life-giving waters underfoot, you'll want to breathe deep and become absorbed in the moment.

After roughly 1.2 miles of hiking, the first of several natural barriers appears. This one is a quagmire of logs and brambles choking the creek where the canyon hits a short, pinched segment. You'll need to scramble around on steep banks, so long pants and sleeves are recommended for this hike. As Dirtyneck Canyon's corridor approaches SR 87, the sounds of whizzing motors occult natural woodland murmurs. A stock tank, bovine grazing field and a flimsy span of barbed wire separating paradise from the asphalt speedway mark the turnaround point.

Scarlet Cinquefoil
Blooms: July-October

LENGTH: 2.89 miles one way

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,300-6,850 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, continue north on SR 87 to Forest Road 613 between mileposts 282 and 283 on the right. Follow FR 613, veering left at the Fortynine Canyon sign and past the first Dirtyneck Canyon sign you will see on the left – this is for Dirtyneck Road. At the 1-mile point, you will see road signs for 9384Q and 6023, with a corral hidden among oak trees about 50 yards off to the left. This is the trailhead. Park in the pullouts and begin hiking on 9384Q.

FOREST ROAD 608

Tonto National Forest

Fitting squarely into the "Who knew?" category of Rim country hiking trails, Forest Road 608 is a pleasant surprise hiding in clear view of State Route 87 near the hamlet of Strawberry.

The route follows the rugged road as it clings to flaking limestone ledges below the Mogollon Rim. Ascending more than 1,000 feet through the filtered shade of Emory oaks and ponderosa pines, the red-earth Jeep route hangs in precipitous knots above Strawberry Canyon. It is shored up by artfully constructed stone retaining walls, where it bends along the choppy contours of the gaping, conifer-fleeced gorge.

In the beginning, the route is not marked, but once you've navigated the maze of paths at the trailhead, the rest of the way is simple to follow. From the trailhead on SR 87, pass the gate, veer right and follow the power line road 500 feet to a fork just before the road heads steeply uphill. Turn left at a green metal post. From this point, ignore the side paths and veer right to stay on the wide road heading uphill. In just under a mile, the first of several rock walls stabilizes a hairpin turn. Additional fortifications are visible high on the cliffs across the canyon. As the trail climbs, the Mazatzal Mountains peek through the forest before the route swings onto an exposed ledge where the road is hacked from wildflower-embellished vertical rock faces.

The 2-mile-long "walls" portion of the hike ends where the road heads inland at the trail's high point. This is a popular turnaround spot, or you can opt to follow the "608" signs 2 more miles through fragrant woodlands to reconnect with State Route 87. Unless you parked a shuttle vehicle there, return the way you came.

LENGTH: 4 miles round trip for the "walls" segment, or 8 miles round trip for the entire road

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,000-7,160 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

Strawberry Trailhead:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 17 miles north on SR 87 to the trailhead at milepost 270 on the right. There's parking for about four cars, but additional space is at the Trail 15 lot a few yards up the road on the left.

Forest Road 608 Trailhead:

From the Strawberry trailhead, continue north on SR 87 to just past milepost 277. Park near the FR 608 gate on the right.

◆

LENGTH: 1 mile round trip (from the rim to the creek)

RATING: difficult

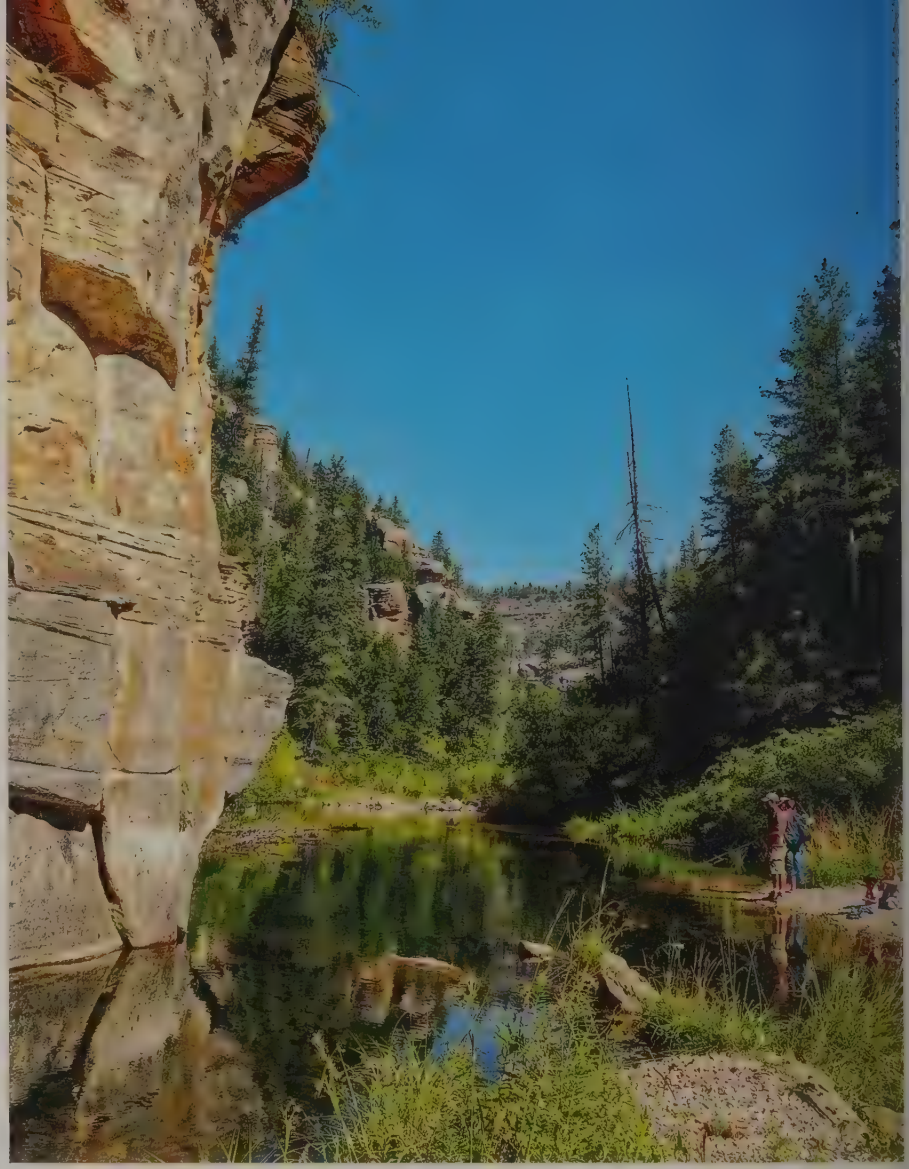
ELEVATION: 6,600-5,950 feet

BEST SEASONS: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, go north on SR 87 and reconnect with SR 260 north of Pine-Strawberry. Continue 3.1 miles on SR 260 to Forest Road 144, near milepost 249. Turn right (east), go 1.8 miles to FR 149, turn left (north) and continue to a three-way junction at FR 142. Go right onto FR 142 and drive 0.9 miles to FR 142E on the left (this is an easy-to-miss, unmarked road). If you reach FR 142F, you've gone too far. Go 2.7 miles on FR 142E to a large, unsigned parking area.

Red-Osier Dogwood
Blooms: May-July



HEADWATERS TRAIL

West Clear Creek Wilderness Area

Looking for a challenge? This discombobulated, demolition zone of a trail offers a dour dose of adventure for denizens of danger. Perhaps that's why, on any given weekend, droves of adrenaline junkies flock to this primitive route, which drops into the wild upper reaches of West Clear Creek.

The "trail" starts at an old, nondescript wood post at the northwest end of the parking area, progressing downhill through an insanely steep quagmire of dead trees, moss-encrusted boulders and scree for a memorable vertical plunge. The difficult climbing ends at the bottom of the canyon, where the waters of West Clear Creek lap up against contorted, towering cliffs and slender sandbars. Beyond this point, wading, swimming and route-finding are required to continue exploring either up or downstream. Head left to see the famous "hanging gardens" – limestone cliffs embedded with drooping green plants – or go right and follow the waterway to a gallery of ancient rock art.

HORSE CROSSING

Coconino National Forest

A leisurely amble through the pristine and complex canyon system of upper East Clear Creek reveals wonders that even the most well-traveled Arizona hikers will find astounding.

There are the epic views from the coniferous forest rim, a scenic drop into the canyon along a fossil-encrusted limestone trail and an emerald-green riparian environment along the water. Sandwiched between two reservoirs, East Clear Creek slices into soft sedimentary pediments, leaving behind a meandering, sheer-walled canyon. This 50-mile ribbon of life-giving water flows northeast from C.C. Cragin (Blue Ridge) Reservoir to Clear Creek Reservoir near Winslow, where it merges with the Little Colorado River. Although traversing the entire length of this gorge would involve technical climbing skills, swimming and rafting, all that's needed to hike the Horse Crossing trail 20 is a pair of boots and a day pack.

Horse Crossing is hemmed in by hardscrabble rock escarpments. At the bottom of the canyon, running water sculpts sandstone walls that look like dunes tilted on their sides in layer-cake formation. Tens of millions of years ago, the landscape surrounding East Clear Creek was part of a vast ocean, and the fossilized remains of sea-dwelling algae, coral and brachiopods are strewn about like scattered bones.

Like all of the "crossing" trails on the Mogollon Rim, this one continues up the opposite side of the canyon. However, it's more fun to walk and wade for several miles up or downstream, where clouds reflected in mirror-like pools in the worn sandstone gives the impression of walking on the sky.

LENGTH: 3 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,400-6,900 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

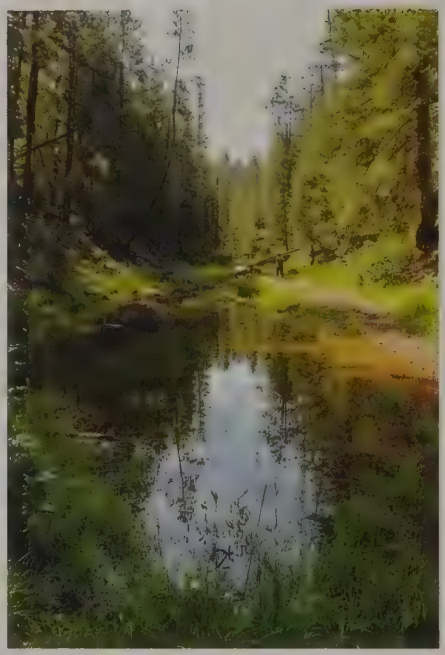
From Payson, travel north on State Route 87 to Forest Road 95, between mileposts 299 and 300 (9.4 miles past the town of Clints Well). Turn right (east) on FR 95. Drive 4 miles to FR 513B. Go left (east) on FR 513B. Continue 2 miles to trailhead. A high-clearance vehicle is required on FR 513B.

JONES CROSSING

Coconino National Forest

The water of East Clear Creek nourishes a sweet ribbon of green across the Mogollon Rim, and a hike into the beautiful Jones Crossing area of this perennial stream rewards with exposure to an impossibly lush canyon flanked by contorted limestone cliffs.

The trek begins at Jones Crossing bridge, where hikers can follow the stream either north or south. The southbound strip is more scenic and better shaded. Right out of the chute, the route – which roughly follows a closed 4-by-4 road – drops hikers into a field of thigh-high grasses splattered with OxEye daisies and wild geraniums. From here, follow the water to enter a steep-walled canyon with intermittent pools and trickles smothered in ferns and bobbing yellow columbine. Water levels fluctuate, so prepare for wet feet. There are a few spots where crossing requires ankle-deep wading.



LENGTH:

Southbound (as described here): whatever – but it's 5.2 miles one-way to the Poverty Draw side canyon

Northbound: whatever, but it's 1.75 miles to an unsigned forest road

RATING: easy, with several creek crossings

ELEVATION: 6,850-7,050 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the intersection of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, go north on SR87 past Pine-Strawberry to milepost 289 and the sign for Jones Crossing at Forest Road 141. Continue 4 miles east on FR141 to the (signed) Jones Crossing bridge and park along the road. FR 141 is maintained dirt with just a few minor bumpy parts – OK for slowly driven sedans. Hike begins across the bridge at the yellow "Area Closed" and "732" signs. The area is closed to all motorized vehicles, but hiking is permitted.

OxEye Daisy
Blooms: June-October

Arizona Tree Frog
Arizona State Amphibian

KEHL CANYON & POVERTY DRAW

Coconino National Forest

Forest roads have always been open to hikers for easy treks. Now that the Forest Service has been closing less-used roads to motorized traffic to allow soil, plants and wildlife habitats to recover, these eroding ruts have found second lives as footpaths.

Forest Road 147E is one of those routes. Located on the Mogollon Rim near Potato Lake, this former Jeep two-track provides easy access to East Clear Creek and the upper portion of Kehl Canyon. Although it will be decades before roads like this are totally absorbed into the wild, they still provide authentic outdoor experiences.

For this adventure, there's no officially numbered hiking trail. However, the route is not too difficult to navigate.

Here's the plan: From the parking area, begin hiking on FR 147E. This dirt road parallels Poverty Draw, which runs off to the left. Well-equipped, experienced hikers can drop into the draw and pick through a maze of brush and pools for 1 mile to East Clear Creek, but the easy way is to walk on FR 147E to the 0.9-mile point, where a barbed-wire fence blocks the road. Do not pass through the fence – instead, head left following the wire line to a primitive entry in the barbed wire. Cross the fence (leaving it the way you found it) and hike downhill on a rudimentary path to East Clear Creek. Cross the creek and hike east (straight ahead) aiming for the washed out embankment.

Head right (south) and follow the decommissioned 4-by-4 road into Kehl Canyon. After roughly 1 mile, the road makes a sharp right turn up a bank. Here is where you'll leave the road and head left to stay in Kehl Canyon. If you thought the hike up to this point was amazing, just wait – it gets even better.

From this point on, contorted sandstone escarpments and old growth coniferous forests close in on the moist and lush canyon. Sturdy boots, long pants and hiking sticks are required to get through the rock barriers, logs, brush, water-carved caves and a Technicolor show of marsh-loving wildflowers.

The canyon snakes 4 miles southward to Rim Road and Kehl Springs campground. The going gets challenging at the 2.6-mile point, where a quagmire of deadfall, boulder-choked washes and narrow passages will slow your pace and tax your problem-solving skills.

LENGTHS:

FR 147E to East Clear Creek: 1 mile

Kehl Canyon turnoff to Rim Road: 4 miles (difficult after 1.2 miles)

RATING: moderate-difficult (route-finding, rough terrain)

ELEVATION: 6,986-7,420 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, continue north on SR 87 to Forest Road 147 just north of milepost 287. Turn right and go 2.5 miles on FR 147 to FR 147E (past Poverty Spring) on the left. Park here.

MILITARY SINKHOLE

Tonto National Forest

There's a sort of reverence associated with trekking to special places. A slower, boots-on-the-ground pace syncs well with epic experiences. Although there are many ways to see the Mogollon Rim from the comfort of a motor vehicle, getting to know its character is best done on foot.

The Rim is a roughly 200-mile escarpment at the edge of the Colorado Plateau that runs east-west across central Arizona. It's easy enough to drive right up to its precipitous cliffs and take an edgy, 40+-mile motor tour along Rim Road 300, but to gain an appreciation of the scale and structure of this geological wonder, you need to climb it from base to ceiling. One of the most convenient ways to do this is to hike up the Military Sinkhole Trail. Located 27 miles east of Payson on State Route 260, the historical route makes an aggressive, 850-foot ascent to scenic ledges on the top of the Rim.

The multifaceted route begins with a walk through the deep, mixed-conifer woodlands of the Tonto National Forest. Shaded by enormous Douglas firs with their characteristic barbed cones, spruce and pines, the first mile is a cool and gentle climb. Where the trail dips into drainages, canopies of bigtooth maples cast filtered sunlight on moss-embellished boulders and mushrooms popping through carpets of pine needles and cracks in decaying logs. Keep this one in mind for a fall foliage hike.

Beyond the maples, the forest thins out, emerging onto an exposed ridge to merge with an abandoned military road built by General George Crook in the 1870s. Like many old roads in the area, it plows uphill without the benefit of climb-calming switchbacks. It's a rocky, quad-burning segment with little shade, but great views of the Mazatzal Mountains and green valleys mitigate the pain. The ankle-twisting road gradually levels out as it enters a corridor of arching Gambel oaks and fields of bracken ferns. At this point, vertical walls start to flank the trail, hinting at the enormity of thrills that follow. With the hardest parts over and the jumbled cliffs of the Rim's edge hovering above, the trail enters the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest for the final slog to the top.

At a signed junction just below Rim Road, the trail continues straight on a bland path that connects with the General Crook Trail. To reap the rewards you came for, head west (left) at the junction and follow Rim Lakes Vista Trail 622. After a short traipse through a flowery meadow, breathtaking vistas and crisp mountain breezes overwhelm the senses. The tough pilgrimage culminates at scenic overlooks that frame wildland views. Here, hordes of camera-toting visitors stream from parked vehicles to stroll a few yards from the road for the same result. Regarding this experience: Hiking is to driving as a clarinet is to a kazoo.

After savoring your hard-won eye candy, head back the way you came, or make an 11.7-mile loop by continuing 3.3 miles on Trail 622 to the Drew Trail 291. Head 1.8 miles downhill to Highline Trail 31, turn left and hike 4.1 miles back to the trailhead.

LENGTH: 5 miles up and back, or 11.7-mile loop.

RATING: moderately difficult

ELEVATION: 6,750-7,600 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

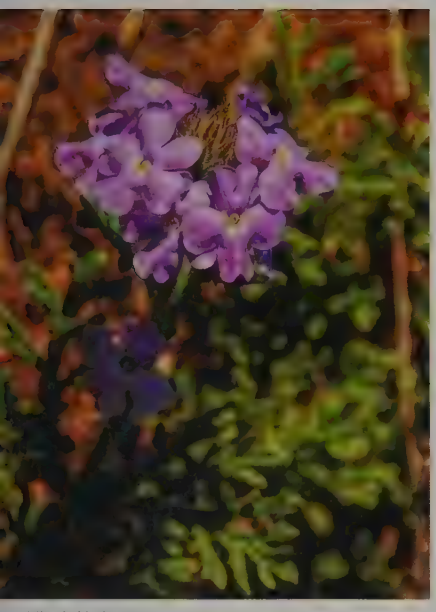
FACILITIES: restroom, corral

GETTING THERE:

Two Sixty Trailhead (SR 260):

From Payson, go 27 miles east (right) on State Route 260 to the "Two Sixty" trailhead turnoff on the left. Follow the good gravel road for a quarter mile to the trailhead parking area.

Rim Lakes Vista Trailhead (Rim Road): For an optional top-down hike, from Payson, go 30 miles east (right) on State Route 260 Rim Road (Forest Road 300). Go 2 miles on FR 300 to the trailhead on the left.



Goodding's Verbena
Blooms: February-October

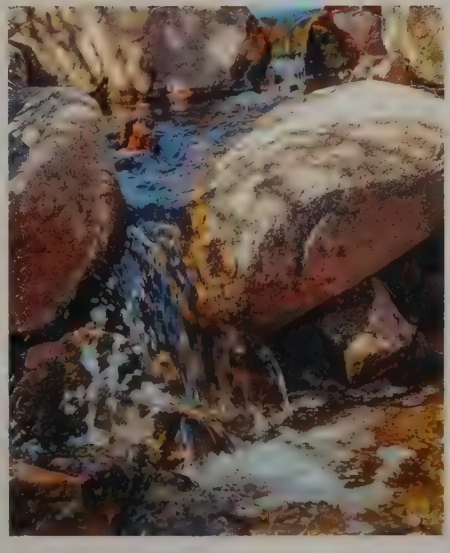
MONUMENT PEAK LOOP

Payson Area Trails System

This easy loop trail swings around the base of 5,092-foot Monument Peak, a pyramidal granite monolith in southeast Payson.

This trail is considered by many hikers to be the "jewel in the crown" of the Payson Area Trails System (PATS) – mostly because of the seasonal stream and its variety of terrain. The folks at PATS have done a terrific job of wrangling and weaving a web of old roads and footpaths into a cohesive collection of easy-to-follow trails flanking the suburbs of Payson.

A work in progress, PATS already boasts dozens of miles of finished routes. Plans are in the works for many more. A key feature of these trails is their accessibility. Trailheads are obvious, and the routes are well-maintained and marked with abundant signage, so hikers of all skill levels can enjoy carefree walks in the forest.



LENGTH: 3-mile loop

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 4,630-4,795 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, go less than 1 mile east on SR 260 to Granite Dells Road. Turn right and go 3.3 miles on Granite Dells (which will turn into Forest Road 435 after 1.3 miles) to the parking area on the left. Begin the hike at either the east or west trailhead sign.

NASH POINT

Coconino National Forest

Forest Service road maps can burn the eyeballs. Black tentacles sprawled across paper maps or smart device screens bearing nondescript numbers and letters give clues about road conditions, where you can take a motorized vehicle, nearby towns and landmarks.

But where do the roads go? Why would a road end abruptly at no particular destination? The best way to find answers is to park and hoof it.

Forest Road 9365R north of the town of Strawberry is a good one to try because its terminus – marked only by an "X" on most maps – is a memorable sight.

Located on the Mogollon Rim just outside Fossil Springs Wilderness Area, the road begins as a typical backwoods Jeep route. On a base of sandstone, smothered in a forest of alligator junipers and ponderosa pines, hikers pass through a pinecone-cluttered corridor bolstered by massive rock slabs. At about a mile into the trek, the road meets a clearing with wide views of Deadman Mesa on the border of Coconino and Tonto National Forests. At this point, it's possible to spot the hike's objective: a basalt knob poking up from the edge of a bluff off to the right.

From here, the route heads downhill, passing a mucky stock tank and barbed-wire relics. After a brief traipse through a low saddle, the rock underfoot changes from tawny sandstone to ashen volcanic boulders and pebbles. The degraded path goes uphill on a juniper-populated slope overlooking Calf Pen Canyon.

Fossil Creek flows through the colorful, rugged gorge, but you'd be hard-pressed to see it from this vantage point. On clear days, Flagstaff's San Francisco Peaks are visible on the horizon.

From the Calf Pen vista, the highpoint of the hike stands out as a wall of lichen-encrusted, steel-gray basalt at road's end. Nash Point rises to 6,546 feet at the edge of Gila and Coconino Counties. A moderate scramble to its summit reveals enhanced views of Calf Pen and the Fossil Springs area. Although it's not clear why anybody would have built a road to such an odd place, the jumbled perch provides satisfying closure and animates an uninspiring "X" on a map.

From here, the route is obvious.

LENGTH: 5.3 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,250-6,526 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of State Routes 260/87 in Payson, go 17.5 miles north on SR 87 to Fossil Creek Road in the town of Strawberry. Continue on SR 87 for another 2.2 miles to just before milepost 273. Turn left into a dirt parking lot.

Pass through the gate (close it behind you) and hike the road. At the 0.25-mile point, continue straight at a fork. At the 0.5-mile mark, veer right at a second fork.

PIVOT ROCK CANYON & WILDCAT SPRING

Coconino National Forest

Lodged between the epic wilderness areas of West Clear Creek and Fossil Creek, the woodlands around Pivot Rock Canyon provide a quiet transition between the two recreational juggernauts. Although it lacks the deep gorges, waterfalls and hiking challenge of its surrounding destinations, the unassuming little space on the Mogollon Rim holds fascinations of its own. Easily accessible off State Route 87 just south of the community of Clints Well, the area can be explored using a 1930s-era Civilian Conservation Corps campsite as a base.

From the no-frills dirt clearing, two short treks with distinct flavors head out in opposite directions. The woodsy, informal routes located just outside of the wilderness boundaries use abandoned roads and footpaths to explore an array of human artifacts and bizarre geology.

Often eclipsed by the epic, vertigo-inducing trails that scale the raw and remote cliffs of WCC (Tramway, Maxwell, Calloway) that are accessible only via tire-eating dirt roads, the Pivot Rock Canyon and Wildcat Spring trails emanate a softer character than their untamed wilderness cousins.

The double-header circuit begins across the road from the campground at a "Road Closed" barrier with a walk to Wildcat Spring. Pass through the gate and follow the faint two-track, veering right (downhill) where the road splits. The road soon narrows to a footpath as it enters a shallow canyon meandering along the edge of an ephemeral stream. The sketchy trail weaves among brambles, hip-high ferns, damp forests and sunlit meadows. Several spur paths and game trails spin off the main route, but the best plan is to follow the paths on the canyon floor. At 1.4 miles, the canyon converges to a point, with evidence of runoff funneling down into the stream channel. Wildcat Spring is up on the east wall of the canyon. A short scramble up to the defunct concrete trough reveals rusty pipes and a crudely poured square tub holding more pine needles than water.

On the flip side, the Pivot Rock Canyon hike is a little more convoluted. Begin hiking on the road at the end of the campground. At the 0.6-mile point, pick up an unsigned footpath on the right heading downhill to a creek channel. For reference, there's a small dirt clearing with a fire ring.

Hop down the limestone slab staircase, head right and follow the obvious paths that crisscross the drainage enveloped by pine-oak woodlands and aspen-shaded clearings. The paths move through a narrow corridor bolstered by outcroppings of layered fossiliferous limestone that harbor water pockets, impressive overhangs and shallow caves.

Keep an eye out for the eponymous rock formation on the upper left embankment roughly half a mile into the canyon. The natural limestone sculpture known as Pivot Rock hides in plain sight above the ravine. Its massive foundation supports a balancing capstone posed like an abandoned project on a potter's wheel. Once you're done visiting the rock, continue hiking the faint path that winds among gooseberry bushes, brambles and gigantic ferns to a point where tiny pools lush with white watercress, yellow monkey flowers and swarms of butterflies and moths herald the approach to Pivot Rock Spring.

Even in drought conditions, a trickle of water usually flows from the spring's location high on the canyon wall. Icy air and a glaze of sweet water oozes from the spring's cave-like source.

LENGTH:

Pivot Rock: 3 miles round trip, or up to 6 miles using linking forest roads

Wildcat Spring: 2.8 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,780-7,100 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 260/87 junction in Payson, go 32 miles north on SR 87 to Forest Road 616, which is located past milepost 284 on the left. Follow FR 616 for 3.3 miles to an unsigned campground downhill on the right.

The Pivot Rock trail begins on the road at the end of the campground. The Wildcat Spring hike begins across from the campground at a closed gate.

POTATO LAKE

Coconino National Forest

Whether called crayfish, crawfish, crawdads or aquatic cockroaches, there are two sure things about the prolific freshwater crustaceans: They harm native species and they love bacon.

With few natural agents to control them, the population of non-native crayfish released into Arizona lakes and streams via bait bucket dumps or other means has exploded. Their voracious appetites and territory-hogging talents are decimating indigenous aquatic wildlife. They consume the eggs and larvae of native fish, amphibians and reptiles and gobble up critical food supplies. Plus, their nearly year-round reproductive cycle means they can commandeer a waterhole in no time flat. They need to go.

The best way to help eradicate them is to prevent their introduction in the first place. The second-best way is to catch them with a dangling wad of raw bacon and cook them up for dinner.

If you're inclined to the latter, pack a net, a propane cook kit and your favorite seasonings, and hike out to Potato Lake. Although you could drive to the tiny lake located off Forest Road 300 on the Mogollon Rim, a hike along two old roads that have been closed to motorized use offers quieter, alternative access.

From the parking area in a primitive campsite 2.5 miles southwest of the lake, hike 0.3 mile north to a "Road Closed" sign. This is Forest Road 9362T, which is open to foot traffic, bikes and equestrian use only. Following the remains of a rocky two-track, the route descends toward the lake on a barely noticeable incline. The 650 feet of elevation loss will be apparent on the way back. This lovely path curves northeasterly through woodlands of Gambel oaks, conifers, New Mexican locusts and a smattering of aspens. Except for a few spots where a healthy understory of ferns and brambles spill over its uneven course, the road is easy to navigate. At the 1.5-mile point, take the less-obvious left fork, where two metal poles mark a "Y" junction. Make note of this swerve, as it's easy to miss on the way back. From here, the route vacillates between shaded woods and dewy meadows with roaming herds of grazing cattle.

At 1.8 miles, veer right onto Forest Road 147B. This segment flanks yawning draws, pastures, waterways and pristine canopies that provide habitats for the endangered Little Colorado spinedace and the Mexican spotted owl. Please respect these pristine ecosystems by staying on the roads and not cutting or jumping fences. At 2.3 miles, a cattle gate marks the beginning of the final 0.2-mile walk to the lake. Ringed with pines, the lake's water level ranges from puddle to sizable pond, depending on rainfall. A 0.7-mile walk around the lake's perimeter features fields of purple thistle that attract swarms of pollinators including hummingbird moths that sip nectar though long, curved feed tubes.

Beneath the lake's glassy surface, crayfish – which resemble mini lobsters – stir up mud and are easy to spot congregating under semi-submerged logs. If you follow Arizona Game & Fish Department rules regarding their capture and transport, you may harvest as many of these villainous invertebrates as you like. Boil them lobster-style for a protein-rich entrée that tastes like crab. They're great with garlic, peppers and corn. Beer helps.

LENGTH: 5.7 miles out and back

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,234-7,888 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Payson, go 27.7 miles north on State Route 87 to Forest Road 300 (Rim Road) located near milepost 281. Go 1.7 miles on FR 300 to Forest Road 9362T on the left. If you have a high-clearance vehicle, descend about 0.1 mile on the rough dirt road and park in the primitive campground. The hike begins at the "Road Closed" sign at the north end of the site.

RED ROCK SPRING

Tonto National Forest

LENGTH: 5 miles one way to Geronimo Trailhead

To Red Rock Spring: 1 mile one way

To Pine Spring: 2 miles one way

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,390-6,050 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

Red Rock Spring Trailhead (west):

From the intersection of State Routes 87/260 in Payson, go 12 miles north on SR 87 to milepost 265 (2 miles north of Tonto Natural Bridge State Park) and turn right on Control Road (Forest Road 64). Continue 2.4 miles to the trailhead on the left. This is easy to miss because the trail sign is located about 30 yards up from the road. There's no parking lot – just find a spot in the turnouts along the road. Control Road is maintained dirt suitable for passenger cars.

Geronimo Trailhead (east):

From the Red Rock trailhead, continue another 3.5 miles on Control Road to Forest Road 440 (Webber Creek Road). Go left (north) on FR 440 and continue 2 miles to the Geronimo trailhead on the right. High clearance is recommended on FR 440.

Water is the life force of the forest. In Arizona, where water is too often in short supply, the forests have some creative ways of storing and distributing the precious liquid. An example of a natural water system can be observed near the base of the Mogollon Rim near Pine.

Beneath the imposing, vertical cliffs that mark the edge of the Colorado Plateau, numerous springs provide reliable water sources for wildlife and long-distance hikers. The springs are charged when melting snow and rain on the 7,000-foot escarpment soaks through the porous rocks emerging hundreds of feet below as gushing waterfalls (Horton Spring), oozing seeps (Dripping Spring) and trickling fountains like those encountered on a hike from Forest Road 64 to the Geronimo Trailhead.

Using Red Rock Trail 294 and part of Highline Trail 31, this customizable, water-themed trek visits two springs and a creek on its way through scrubby foothills and damp, pine-oak woodlands. Trail 294 climbs more than 600 feet on a rocky, juniper-shaded road that uses subtle turns and natural stone staircases to ascend the rugged slopes below the Rim. At the half-mile point, veer right at a rock barricade and pick up the narrower, loose rock path heading skyward. On the way up, glimpses of the Mazatzal Wilderness tease of sweeping vistas to come. At the 1-mile point, the trail meets Highline Trail 31, which is also part of the state-traversing Arizona Trail.

With the major climbing done, you can now breathe easier and enjoy hiking to the water spots strung out along the route. Red Rock Spring is located a few yards to the left (west) of the junction. It's a beautiful, shaded spot with a concrete trough that usually has water suitable for drinking once it's been filtered. From here, hike 1 mile east (go right at the junction) to Pine Spring. Sheltered among tall pines and whispering maples, this historical site features two antique wooden spring boxes that are no longer effective at trapping the flow. The wayward water runs downhill in lazy rivulets, supporting a ribbon of greenery and a healthy population of wildflowers growing on a soggy embankment. In a pinch, you could filter some drinking water here, but don't count on it.

The next 3 miles of the route duck in and out of dark forests and sun-exposed, yucca-fringed ledges before coming to the cool waters of spring-fed Webber Creek near the Geronimo Trailhead. Up for more? The Highline Trail continues 8 miles east to the 260 Trailhead, while the Arizona Trail turns north at Washington Park.

ROAD 235 TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

Cutting through a coniferous forest near the edge of the Mogollon Rim, the 235 Road Trail is an easy hike with a big payoff. The trek begins on a wide, two-track dirt road flanked by enormous ponderosa pines. At the 0.4-mile point, go left at a signed junction heading toward Chevelon Canyon. Here, the road passes through a wildlife habitat area replete with sun-drenched meadows, watering holes and aspen trees.

Although the trail is open to bikes as well as hikers, the surrounding conservation area may only be explored on foot or horseback. Soon, the trail becomes smothered in rows of young pines that create an enchanting "green tunnel" leading to the confluence of three striking canyons.

The trail dead-ends at a promontory point, with the head of Chevelon Canyon straight ahead and the precipitous gorges of Willow Springs Canyon on the east and Woods Canyon on the west. Excellent views can be enjoyed by wandering around the point where limestone ledges and tree roots maintain tenuous holds hundreds of feet above the abyss.

Douglas Fir Cone
The largest tree in Arizona is known for its "spiny" cones.

○

LENGTH: 8.2 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 7,560-7,647 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go east (right) on SR 260 to Forest Road 300 (Rim Road) located across from the Mogollon Rim Visitor Center and signed for Woods Canyon Lake. Turn left on FR 300 and continue 0.25 mile to the Rim Top trailhead on the right. The hike begins behind the big General Crook Trail sign near the restrooms. Roads are 100 percent paved.

ROUND VALLEY

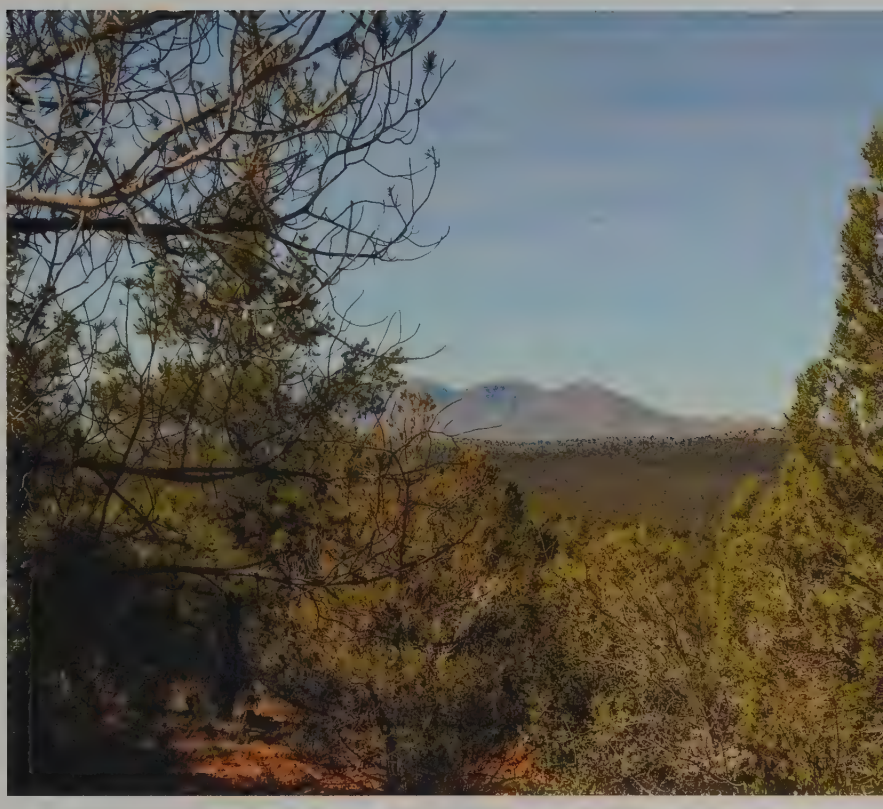
Payson Area Trails System

The Payson Area Trails System (PATS) is a collection of routes weaving through the business districts and suburbs of the north-central Arizona town. The trails tie in nicely with nearby Tonto National Forest routes and most are open to hikers, equestrians, bikers and ATV users alike.

Round Valley Trail begins in a quiet residential neighborhood with a climb along footpaths and 4-by-4 roads that leads to scenic high points with far-ranging views of the flat-topped profile of the Mogollon Rim and majestic peaks of the Mazatzal Mountains. Because many unsigned roads bisect the route, be sure to look for PATS signs to stay on track.

Even though it's close to civilization, the trek offers a genuine outdoor escape as it runs through undulating juniper-pine forests south of town. In springtime, wildflowers like the ground-hugging purple blossoms of the feather plume dahlia and wild carrots pop up from the loose, rocky soils. One of the trail's most prolific spring bloomers is a shrub called Gregg's Ceanothus, which sprouts tiny white or pink flowers that release a lilac fragrance from March through May.

After topping out at 5,200 feet, the trail dips down into Round Valley and curves toward State Route 87, where it approaches its west trailhead on Tonto Apache Tribe land.



LENGTH: 4.5 miles one way

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 4,800-5,200 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

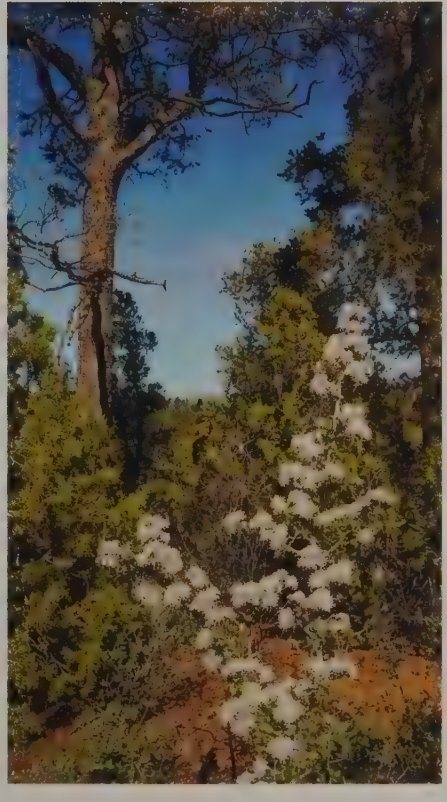
GETTING THERE:

East trailhead:

From Phoenix, travel north on State Route 87 (Beeline Highway) to Payson. Just past the Mazatzal Casino, turn right on Phoenix Street (easy to miss; near the Circle K), drive 1.6 miles to Gibson Court, turn right and continue 0.1 mile to the inconspicuous trailhead on the left. There's parking along the road and in a cul de sac a few yards up the street. Do not block private drives in the area.

West trailhead:

Located at the south end of the Sonic restaurant at SR 87 and Green Valley Parkway near the Mazatzal Casino.



SARDINE TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

Sardine Trail 536 is an unsung hero within the Willow Springs Lake area trail system. Over its 2.5-mile length, it acts as a recreational super highway connecting the popular 7.6-mile Willow Springs Bike Loop with campsites and myriad routes debarking from four trailheads around Willow Springs Lake.

This shaded route is mostly used as a transit corridor by mountain bikers linking loop trail hubs and by anglers toting poles to the lake's secluded coves. Well-marked by bright orange diamonds, the trail roughly parallels State Route 260. Although mild traffic noise is ever present, the fact that this path stays close to heavily traveled roads is a comfort to those looking to experience the woodlands and water of the Sitgreaves National Forest without wandering far from civilization.

One way to explore the virtues of this trail is to begin at the Willow Springs trailhead. From the parking area, cross FR 149 and pick up the trail heading east toward the lake. The hike twists though classic ponderosa pine forests, with glimpses of water through the trees. The trail makes many gooseneck turns that can be confusing, so be sure to spot the next orange blaze before moving on. Don't let the minor route-finding, towering green canopies and mountain breezes distract you from noticing the overhead display of ospreys gliding on air currents and brilliant blue Steller's jays squawking in the treetops.

The trail's special feature is two rustic footbridges that span drainages where wildflowers run amok among an understory of ferns and fragrant patches of clover. Beyond the first bridge, an optional short walk along fishermen's paths leads to a cattail-choked finger cove surrounded by limestone ledges. At the 2-mile point, the trail meets the junction for the 7.6-mile Bike Loop and the Horse Trap Trailhead. Tack on the Loop for an 11.6-mile round trip hike, or return the way you came to conclude an easy 4-mile walk in the forest.

LENGTH: 4 miles or 11.6 miles (as described here)

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 7,045-7,623 feet (7,700 feet with bike loop)

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restrooms at Rim Top Trailhead

GETTING THERE:

Willow Springs Trailhead:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 29.6 miles east on AZ 260 to Forest Road 149 near milepost 283, turn left and continue 0.4 mile to the trailhead on the left. Roads are paved.

Rim Top Trailhead:

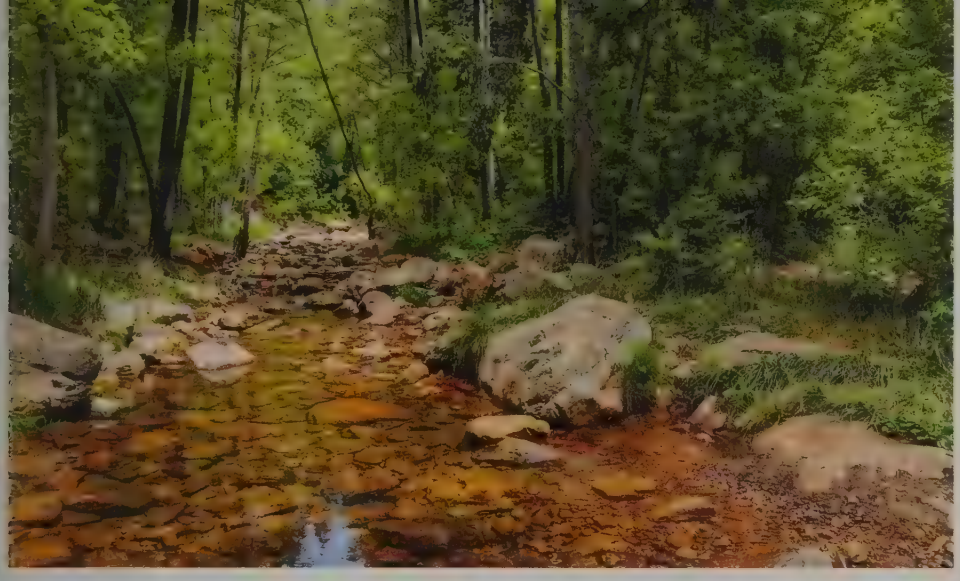
From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go east (right) on SR 260 to Forest Road 300 (Rim Road), located across from the Mogollon Rim Visitor Center and signed for Woods Canyon Lake. Turn left on FR 300 and go 0.25 mile to the trailhead on the right. The hike begins behind the big General Crook Trail sign.

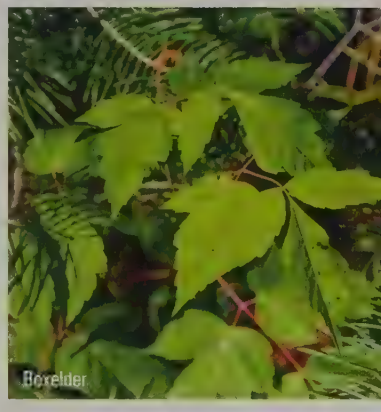
"Footbridge" Trailhead:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 30.2 miles east on AZ 260 to just before milepost 284 and FR 148. Turn left into the dirt lot marked by a "Day Use Only" sign and a stone wall.

Horse Trap Trailhead:

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 31 miles east on AZ 260 to the Horse Trap trailhead on the right between mileposts 284 and 285 (across from Young-Heber Road).





SEE SPRING & SEE CANYON

Tonto National Forest

On the jagged cliffs below the Mogollon Rim, dozens of springs dispense water that filters through the porous limestone escarpments. The springs range in flow from steady trickles that drain into green seeps to icy founts that gush from solid rock, carving gullies and fostering thick forests.

See Spring is one of the latter. Its location a half mile off the See Canyon Trail along Christopher Creek in Tonto National Forest 20 miles east of Payson makes it a popular choice for a short day hike, or an add-on to the 2.5-mile artery route that climbs over 1,700 feet to the top of the Rim. There's a local hiker adage that when you trek See Canyon, all you see is the canyon. This is mostly true, but, oh, what a canyon it is to behold.

Right out of the chute, the trail delivers a rich palette of sights and sounds, plus enough challenge (or not) to satisfy a full gamut of hiking styles. You don't have to walk very far before becoming immersed in the perennial flow of Christopher Creek and the lush woodlands that thrive in its moist environs.

The journey begins with a brief walk on the Highline Trail. From the trailhead, follow the footpath to where a pair of white diamond symbols tacked to trees indicate where the route makes an easy crossing of the creek. On the opposite bank, walk a few yards and veer left at the See Canyon Trail junction. The next half mile traces the stream through a mix of meadows and forests of New Mexico locusts, boxelders and ponderosa pines. Beneath the leafy canopy, healthy tangles of canyon grapevines mingle with insidious clumps of poison ivy (tip: leaves of three, let it be).

LENGTH: 2.6 miles roundtrip (5 miles with See Canyon Trail)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,106-6,725 feet (7,860 feet with See Canyon Trail)

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Payson, go 20.2 miles east on State Route 260 to the Christopher Creek Loop exit. Turn left and go 1 mile to Forest Road 284 (across from the Tall Pines Market). Turn left and go 1.6 miles to the trailhead. Access road is good dirt/gravel suitable for all vehicles.

The path crosses several rocky drainages as it gently gains elevation to reveal glimpses of Promontory Butte, a major Rim land feature. At the 0.8-mile point, head right at the See Spring Trail junction where the half-mile spur path swerves away from the creek and begins a moderate climb.

The old "all you see" saw hits home here as thick stands of bigtooth maples, Gambel oaks, alligator junipers, Arizona walnut and Douglas and white firs choke the trail into a shady, slim passage, obscuring all but sky and vegetation. A few sets of switchbacks mitigate the 400-foot ascent that lands hikers in an enchanting natural water park. Roughly 1.3 miles from the trailhead, the first signs of the See Spring waterworks appear as jumbled ravines funneling crystalline streams.

Follow the faint footpaths another 0.2 mile and you'll arrive at the spring source, where water pours from rock crevices all around. The splashy rhythms of water rushing over mossy boulders and flattened ferns combine with bird calls and rustling leaves for a calming culmination of a short trek with much to see.

Fleabane
Blooms: February-October

Mushrooms

SHEEP CREEK POINT

Forest Lakes

LENGTH: 2.7 miles one way from SR 260 to the point (may vary based on where you park)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 7,400-7,530 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 260/87 junction in Payson, go 35.5 miles east on SR 260 to the community of Forest Lakes. Just before milepost 289, turn right (south) on Merzville Road (Forest Road 260B) and park in one of the many dirt turnouts within the first half mile. The road is open to motorized use and turns into a very rough 4-by-4 track after about a mile.

It has been argued that hiking isn't always about the destination – it's the journey that matters most. Objective-oriented hikes like those that culminate on mountain summits or in secluded, special places have their merits, but their wham-pow payoffs can eclipse what's stuffed between the trailhead and the goalpost. Depending on your point of view, the stuffing can be a means to an end or the sweet filling between cookie wafers.

When compared to interest-packed nearby Mogollon Rim trails, the "stuffing" on Merzville Road that runs between State Route 260 and Sheep Creek Point near Forest Lakes smacks of mediocrity. Its narrow, nondescript course is a mix of graded dirt and rutted, rocky passages. As a hiking route, the road has some obvious drawbacks. First, it's open to motorized use and is frequented by ATV and dirt bike riders. Second, with no spectacular natural features like those peppered throughout traditional hiking trails, everything great about this journey happens where it dead-ends at Sheep Creek Point.

It's not as if the road hike is terrible. There are oak-shaded wet meadows teeming with wild turkeys. There's a beautiful section where mature ponderosa pines and saplings create a "green tunnel" that smells of butterscotch and fresh sap. Ravens roost and crackle in the gnarls. Under the coniferous canopy, wildflowers and mushrooms color the forest floor.

The only obstacles along the road – which makes a straight shot south through patchy woodlands – are occasional mud puddles and uneven footing. Depending on where you parked along the road, the hike to Sheep Creek Point is about 2 miles one way. You'll know you're close when canyon winds pick up and a broad mesa appears directly ahead.

A few more minutes of walking brings you to a precipice at the border of the Apache-Sitgreaves and Tonto National Forests. The exposed nose of the point hovers above Valentine Canyon, with views of historical OW Ranch and the Canyon Creek Hatchery along green creek corridors 900 feet below. Across the chasm, the ragged, vertical cliffs of Mule Creek Point to the east and OW Point to the west appear as flat-topped jetties with sporadic stands of pines that survived the 2002 Rodeo-Chedeski Fire.

A stroll along the point's margins reveals intriguing glimpses of the hatchery complex. Managed by the U.S. Forest Service (Tonto National Forest), the site's water "raceways" produce an average of 80,000 pounds of trout annually that are used to stock Arizona's lakes and streams. Most of the trout that end up in White Mountains waterways and 20 percent of the statewide supply begin their journey here.

This windswept edge is the turnaround point of a modest trek with a pretty sweet special place in the middle.

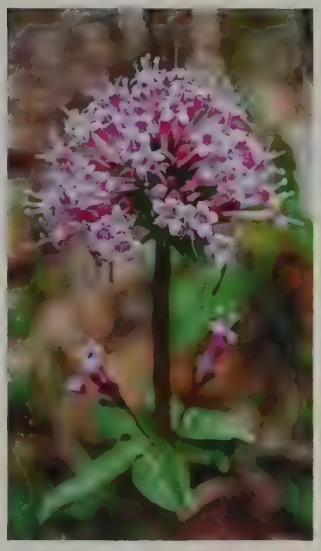
TRAMWAY TRAIL

West Clear Creek Wilderness Area

Contained within the striated walls of a remote canyon on the Mogollon Plateau is the most expressive example of what might happen if the powerful hand of nature applied a sledgehammer to a mesa and filled the resultant wound with water.

Narrow and deep, the rough-hewn upper reaches of West Clear Creek are a maze of cracked and tilted tributary slot canyons scoured out of contorted layers of sedimentary rocks. From its headwaters on the Mogollon Rim, the creek rips through a riparian gallery forest before merging with the Verde River 40 miles downstream. The Tramway Trail 32, which offers the easiest access to this pristine wilderness, begins on the cliffs overlooking the canyon. The remains of a defunct cable tram – used from 1942 to 1965 to stock the creek with trout – hang in rusted knots from an enormous ponderosa pine tree.

The route into the canyon is a spider crawl along a thin trail that clings to the siltstone precipice. For those who are not bothered by heights, the steep switchbacks, rock scrambles and dizzying drop-offs deliver a substantial adrenaline rush. At the base of the trail, there's a primitive campsite above a large pool of water where healthy tufts of Canada violets and ferns sprout from loamy soil. Although the campsite marks the official end of the trail, adventurous hikers can pick their way along the creek through thick, wildlife-rich woodlands. At every bend in the stream, 800-foot-high canyon walls converge and seem to swallow up the sky only to release it as alcoves emerge from beyond the clutch of the stony precipice.



Arizona Valerian
Blooms: April-July

LENGTH: 1 mile round trip (on trail)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,900-6,650 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to the State Route 260 interchange near Camp Verde. Go east (right) on SR 260 (General Crook Trail) to the junction with SR 87. Turn north (left) and continue for 11 miles to Lake Mary Road (Forest Road 3). Go 7.5 miles north (left) on Lake Mary Road to Forest Road 81, turn west (left) and drive 3 miles to FR 81E. Follow FR 81E and the "Tramway Trail" and "Trail" signs for 3.6 miles to FR 693. Go west (right) on FR 693 and continue 1.2 miles to a fork in the road. Turn left at the fork and drive less than a half mile to the trailhead. A high-clearance vehicle is required.

WILLOW CROSSING

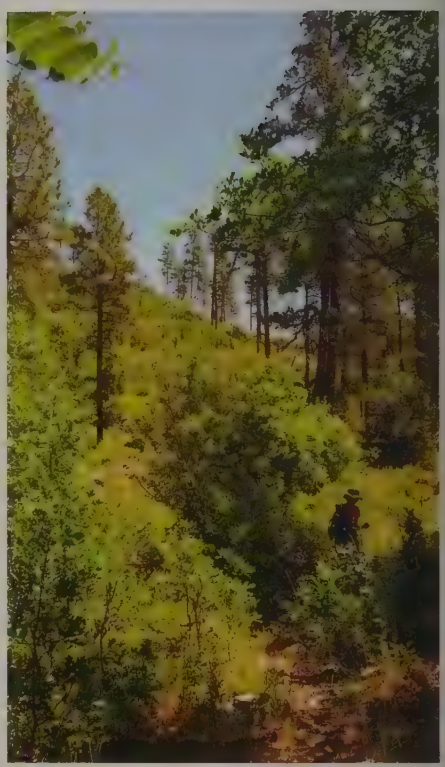
Coconino National Forest

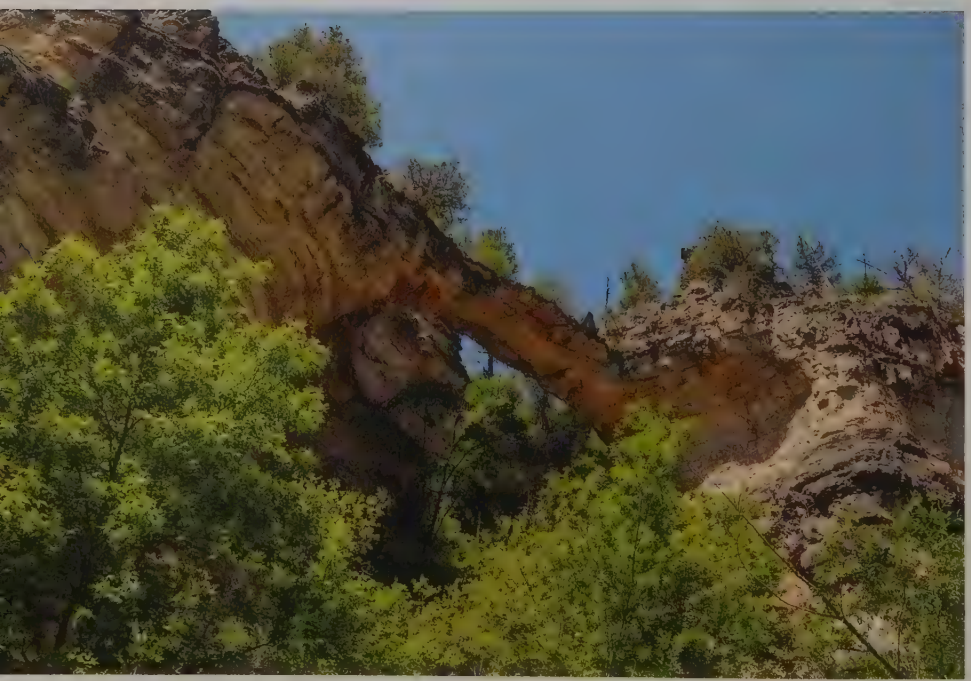
Nelson's Larkspur
Blooms: June

The shallow gullies of Willow Valley are the most remote and rarely visited "capillary canyons" that funnel water into mighty West Clear Creek.

This picturesque trek begins on a sun-warmed plateau where wildfire-charred tree stumps and a community of vociferous ravens cast an eerie aura over a conflicted landscape. Toppled trees and a smattering of tall survivor pines coexist with saplings and flower-laden shrubs that sometimes obscure the path. To stay on track, follow the old barbed-wire fence to a gate near the edge of the canyon. Pass the gate (leave it as you found it) and pick up the obvious path leading downhill.

Smothered in Arizona alders, oaks, dogwood and (of course) willows, the valley is like a tiny Garden of Eden, embellished with a natural arch etched out of the limestone canyon walls. Like all "crossing" trails on the Rim, this one hops the (usually dry in summer) streambed and heads up the opposite side of the canyon, making for a mini rim-to-rim-to-rim day hike.





LENGTH: 3 miles round trip

ELEVATION: 6,400-6,800 feet

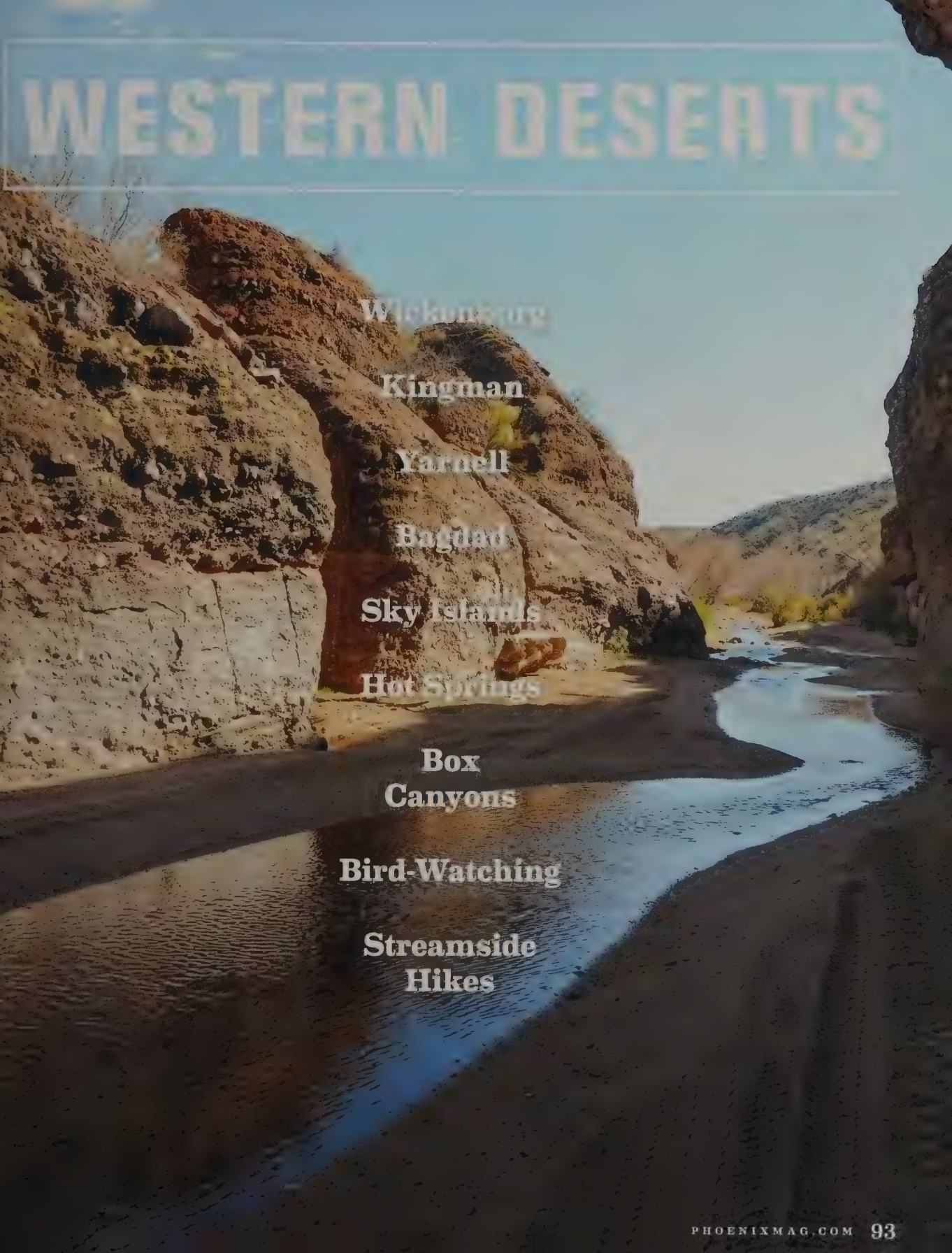
RATING: easy

BEST SEASONS: May-November

GETTING THERE:

From Payson, go north on State Route 87 to Lake Mary Road (Forest Road 3), turn left and go north on FR 3 to FR 81 at milepost 297.7. Turn left and go 3.1 miles to FR 81E. Set your odometer, go left on FR 81E and continue 1.14 miles to FR 9366, an easy-to-miss, unmarked dirt road on the left. Go 0.5 mile on FR 9366M to a cattle guard and gate. The trailhead is just past the gate on the left near the generic "Trail" sign and rock cairns. Roads are passable by sedan, but high clearance is recommended.

WESTERN DESERTS



BEN AVERY TRAIL

Eagletail Mountain Wilderness

Deep within the remote Eagletail Wilderness, a cluttered gallery of rock art has survived among basalt niches for more than 3,500 years, leaving behind a mysterious record of the area's ancient inhabitants. The Ben Avery Trail is the only designated path into the wilderness, and although it is more than 20 miles in length, an out-and-back hike to the petroglyphs is much shorter.

The trail begins in open desert and then drops into a dry wash where carefully placed cairns serve as guides through a maze of arroyos. In spring, water lingers in tiny pools and wildflowers, including fields of owl clover, ajo lilies, chicory and lupine, soften views of the surrounding jagged ridges. Follow the trail toward a distinct black outcropping to the southeast and soon the cliffs will reveal seldom-seen images of sheep, tortoises, plants, scorpions, deer, reptiles and a mysterious collection of geometric designs.

LENGTH: 7 miles round trip

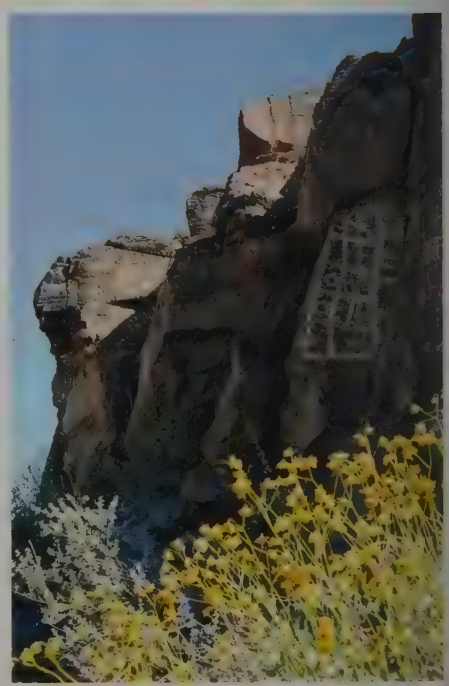
RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 1,700-1,820 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take Interstate 10 west to just past the town of Tonopah and take exit 81 (Harquahala Road). Follow Harquahala Road south for about 5 miles to Courthouse Rock Road. Head west (toward the very prominent Courthouse Rock landmark) on Courthouse Rock Road and then merge right onto Pipeline Road. Continue for 11 miles to a turnoff on the left and continue south toward Courthouse Rock for another 1.5 miles to the signed trailhead. A high-clearance vehicle is required.



BOX CANYON of the HASSAYAMPA RIVER

Wickenburg

WICKENBURG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
See page 252.

For most of its 100-mile course, the Hassayampa River flows only in subterranean channels. But for roughly 14 miles, bedrock buoys the water above ground. Two of the easiest access points to the wet sections are the Hassayampa River Preserve and Box Canyon.

While the preserve area is a quiet place with beautifully tame riverside trails, "The Box" is an outdoor recreation free-for-all. Hikers and equestrians share the waterway with motorized traffic, gold panners and raucous families with kids and dogs.

From the parking area, a rugged Jeep road descends from the lip of the canyon to the river gorge. The exploratory trek heads off in both directions. Turn west to visit the rubble of defunct Mistake Mine, or go east along a water-hopping route that leads through the most spectacular section of the canyon, where vertical walls of conglomerate rock pinch the water into lacy rivulets and shifting sandbars before exiting into Dinosaur Wash. The canyon narrows are about a mile in length, and water levels vary with rainfall, so be prepared to get your feet wet.

LENGTH: up to 1.5 miles each way

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,240-2,295 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From the U.S. 60/93 traffic circle in Wickenburg, go 4.6 miles north on U.S. 93 to Scenic Loop Road at milepost 195. Turn right, drive 6.8 miles, take the right fork at a Bureau of Land Management "No Dumping" sign. Go 0.1 mile to the parking area. Scenic Loop is sedan-friendly graded dirt, however, some sections may wash out during heavy rain.

LENGTH: 1.4 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 3,799-3,870 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: 5 a.m.-10 p.m.

FACILITIES: porta potties, seating area

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to exit 223B for State Route 74 (Carefree Highway). Go 30 miles west toward Wickenburg to U.S. 60, turn right and continue to the traffic circle in Wickenburg and connect to U.S. 93. Go 43 miles north on U.S. 93 and turn right on State Route 97 (just past milepost 155). Continue 10.6 miles to State Route 96, turn left and continue 4.2 miles on SR 96 (turns into Main Street) to the town of Bagdad. Turn right on Lindahl Road and go 1.3 miles, then turn left onto an unsigned dirt road just before the sign for Turtle Rock Ranch. Follow the narrow dirt (sedan-friendly) road 0.1 mile to the trailhead.

BRIDLE CREEK HABITAT ENHANCEMENT AREA

Town of Bagdad

On a desert highway halfway between Phoenix and Las Vegas, motorists are treated to a botanical spectacle that unfolds in springtime.

From late February through April, the Joshua trees along U.S. 93 sprout gigantic, lime-white blooms with surreal spikes and a not-so-sweet aroma. The annual event is reason enough take a drive along this scenic route through a landscape of sprawling flatlands tossed with rugged canyons and mountains. Despite the bloom fest, only a handful of the travelers rumbling by ever stop to marvel at the hairy-barked yuccas that can live up to 300 years. Although it's impossible to know their reasons for zooming past or their ultimate destinations, one thing's certain: Most motorists are not going to Bagdad.

And that's a shame – especially for vehicles with hikers on board. Those who veer off the byway and head into town will be treated to a pleasant "Who knew?" moment. Located 100 miles northwest of Phoenix, the company town orbits around the Freeport-McMoRan copper and molybdenum mine's massive open-pit operation that hums 24/7. Main Street is a mix of mom-and-pop shops, watering holes, a single grocery store, gas station and a golf course. Although it doesn't scream "Primo hiking destination!" the hamlet's signature trail is a fine one indeed.

The Bridle Creek Trail is an unexpected trek surrounded by an expanse of barren mesas and raw, mineral-rich backcountry tucked between the Aquarius and Weaver mountains. The 27-acre Bridle Creek Habitat Enhancement Area traces the edge of Sanders Mesa and the riparian green zone of an intermittent desert stream. The site is certified through the Wildlife Habitat Council's "Wildlife at Work" program and is managed for habitat enhancement, community outreach and wildlife rehabilitation activities.

Except for three easy creek crossings that involve minor rock-hopping, the park-like, linear trail is an easy stroll among cottonwood, willow and juniper trees. Halfway through the out-and-back hike, the terraced mounds of the mine are visible in the distance. Since Bagdad isn't near a major metropolis, it's a long drive for most people. To get your gas money's worth, plan on taking the guided Bagdad Mine Overlook tour conducted on Saturdays and Sundays at 12:30 p.m. Head back to the Joshua Tree forest, pull over at a roadside table and enjoy the blooms.

BURRO CREEK

Burro Creek Wilderness Area

WICKENBURG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
See page 252.

Burro Creek is a 23-mile-long desert waterway located in the rugged and remote wilderness north of Wickenburg. The hike is just a walk along the creek. Conditions vary according to water levels. In dry times, it's possible to hike for miles without getting wet feet. However, during periods of heavy rain and snowmelt, wading is required.

The area is known for its active wildlife, including beavers, javelina, shorebirds and families of wild burros dodging among the copper-colored cliffs and mesquite forests.

◆

LENGTH: 6-9 miles round trip

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 1,960-2,100 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms, water

GETTING THERE:

From the intersection of U.S. 60 and U.S. 93 in Wickenburg, go 59 miles north on U.S. 93 to the turnoff for Burro Creek campground (between mileposts 140 and 141). Turn left onto the access road. Drive 1.5 miles to the parking lot. Roads are paved up to the last 1.5 miles, and passable by sedan.

CAMP BEALE LOOP

Cerbat Foothills Recreation Area, Kingman

LENGTH: 3.26-mile loop

Other linking trails:

Badger Trail: 3.20 miles

Castle Rock Trail: 4.45 miles

Monolith Garden Loop: 7 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 3,640-4,100 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From the Interstate 40/U.S. 93 in Kingman, take exit 40. Continue 0.5 mile to Fort Beale Drive, turn right and go 1.3 miles to the signed trailhead access road on the left. Continue 0.2 mile to the parking area.

Hikers, be forewarned: You might find yourself hitting the brakes while traveling through Kingman on U.S. 93. Several trailheads tucked among hulking white cliffs and a surreal landscape of mesas and buttes beckon hike-inclined travelers to take a detour of discovery on an eclectic collection of trails just off this bleak strip of highway in Arizona's far northwest corner.

The Cerbat Hills Recreation Area in northwest Kingman has four interconnected routes, each with unique attractions. Camp Beale Trail, which sits at the heart of the system, offers a moderate day hike that links to the area's more than 17 miles of trails. For newbies, it's a good place to start. At just over 3 miles in length, the Camp Beale Loop gives a scenic overview of the system with less than 500 feet of climbing. From the trailhead, head right, following the well-defined path as it begins its ascent. Almost immediately, you'll be treated to epic views of the Hualapai Mountains to the southeast, which rise to over 8,000 feet at the edge of the Mojave Desert.

These pine-capped volcanic sky islands jut 4,000 feet above dusty, creosote-populated plains. Sometimes, snow lingers on the high peaks through spring. As the hike progresses uphill, huge panoramic vistas of the Grand Wash Cliffs and Hualapai Valley unwind with every few feet of elevation gained. Next, the route ducks into a gorge where soft black sand scoured from ebony-colored lava flows lines a wash that wiggles though grasslands and stands of sharp yucca.

The short canyon segment morphs into another uphill trudge that ends at roughly the halfway point where benches mark the high point and the junction for the 4.45-mile Castle Rock Trail that heads north to a regal, turreted rock formation. Here, first glimpses of the Monolith Garden area appear to the south. The vertical silhouettes of the granite behemoths that stand like dominos (or Legos, as a kid on the trail described them) are the signature attractions of the Monolith Garden Loop, which can be accessed via a junction farther down the Beale trail or by a dedicated trailhead across U.S. 93. The return leg of the loop bends around basalt outcroppings, deep gullies and cacti-blanketed slopes as it makes an easy decent. Keep an eye out for tiny quartz crystals blooming from lumps of russet lava scattered along this final section.

You'll cross the black sand wash one last time before coming full circle, but the adventure has one more stop. On the way out on Camp Beale Drive, look for the Camp Beale Spring historic site on the right. A permit is required to walk within the property, but a historic marker and a monument outside the grounds give special insight into the area's rich and sometimes tragic past.

DINOSAUR WASH

Wickenburg

WICKENBURG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
See page 252.

If you stay alert on this hike, it's easy to spot the Stegosaurus. But you'll have to navigate a convoluted trail system to get to it, and that's not so easy. The Stegosaurus-shaped rock outcropping looms above Dinosaur Wash with its head twisted back over a scaled spine frozen in a posture that looks like the losing side of a Jurassic joust. This signature basaltic formation is the only "dinosaur" you'll see while trudging through the eponymous wash that's a part of the Sophie's Flat Trail system north of Wickenburg. What you will see more of is a mix of spectacular desert vistas, hardscrabble gullies, volcanic peaks and a matrix of sandy washes.

Although it's just a few miles north of town, the trail system has a pure wild west, middle-of-nowhere feel. The looped trails are blandly named A,B,C,D and E, but they're anything but boring. The core A Trail begins at the Sophie's Flat trailhead, where there's ample parking, a horse staging area and restrooms. A map kiosk shows a trail layout that belies a confusing start, missing signs and several tricky turns. The trek to Dinosaur Wash involves linking the A, B, C and D trails for a 9.5-mile out-and-back hike.

The most difficult route-finding happens near the start, where after descending to a sprawling arroyo, the A Trail gets swallowed up in shifting sands. Although there are signs in the wash, they are tough to find. Once at the point where the A Trail begins its first uphill ascent, signage becomes clearer. From beginning to end, it's a challenging hike with continual dips, climbs and calf-burning slogs through beachy washes. After 3 miles, the best views of the hike come at a mountain pass between Creighton Peak and Red Top, where the serpentine course of the Hassayampa River and tendril drainages whittle through a desert of ragged peaks and chiseled canyons.

From the pass, the route dives down toward the destination. Watch carefully for another befuddling junction where the trail meets two A Trail signposts near a giant boulder. Look for an unsigned path that heads north between the two signs. This is the D Trail that leads to the wash. As you trudge downhill among ocotillos and hedgehog cacti, keep an eye out for the stegosaurus rock formation looming out from the cliffs. Some argue it looks more like a bear, lizard, hawk or a boa constrictor. Regardless of what one might see in the lithic form, it's an entertaining point of contention and a great photo op.

Hang a left where the path dead-ends at the wash. You might want to tie a bandana here (take it with you when you return) because beyond this point, there are no trail signs and it's easy to miss on the way back. The next mile of hiking is the icing on the cake for those who have managed to get through the maze. Dinosaur Wash expands and contracts as it wiggles through sections of a broad, dry river course, stony corridors and box canyons built of churned lava flows, sculpted sediments and fossil stream beds.

Other than the pain of hiking through sand and a few minor down climbs, reasonably fit hikers should be able to get to the 4.97-mile point where a slick rock drop-off would require more serious scrambling to continue another mile to the Hassayampa River, Mistake Mine Ruins and the Box Canyon. The drop-off makes for a good spot to take a break and discuss (or argue) whether the dino rock is a bird, reptile or mammal before heading back the way you came.

LENGTH: 9.5 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,337-2,789 feet (1,100 feet cumulative gain)

BEST SEASON: November-March

FACILITIES: restroom, map kiosk, horse staging area

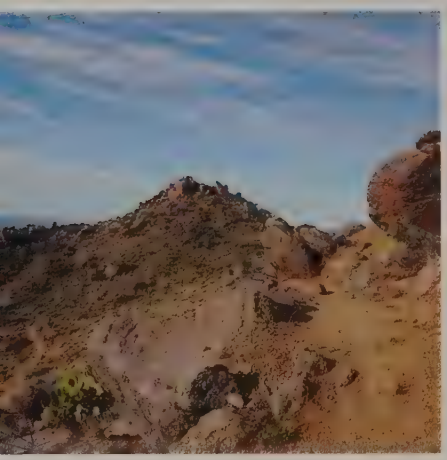
GETTING THERE:

Sophie's Flat Trailhead:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to Carefree Highway/State Route 74 (exit 223). Go 30 miles west on SR 74 toward Wickenburg, turn right at U.S.60 and continue to just before the Hassayampa River Bridge traffic circle in Wickenburg. Turn right on El Recreo Drive, go 0.25 mile and veer right onto Constellation Road. Continue 2.7 miles, turn left onto Blue Tank Road and drive 1.3 miles to the trailhead on the right. The last 4 miles are on undulating dirt roads suitable for sedans.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

From the trailhead, follow A Trail 1.1 miles to B Trail. Follow B Trail to the 1.88-mile point, veer right and follow C Trail to the 2.39-mile point and turn left on the A Trail. Follow A Trail to the 2.91-mile point and connect with D Trail. Follow D Trail less than a mile, drop into the obvious course of Dinosaur Wash and head northwest (left). Hike to the 4.97-mile point and turn around at a slick rock drop-off.



GRANITE MOUNTAIN HOTSHOTS MEMORIAL STATE PARK

Yarnell

In addition to the usual gear and plenty of water, you'll want to take along a supply of tissues on this emotional trek.

The Hotshots and Journey Trails at the Granite Mountain Hotshots Memorial State Park near Yarnell is an oddly remote and decidedly vertical destination with a tragic backstory. As State Route 89 approaches the site, the imposing Weaver Mountains rise over the desert in sheer granite heaps that belie the daunting nature of the trails that wander through them.

The park trailhead is little more than a slender pullout where a metal staircase hoists hikers up an insurmountable cliff face to connect with the 2.8-mile Hotshots Trail. From this point, the hike is a whole lot of up with a few short stretches of flat in between. Epic views of the Date Creek Mountains and dry-wash-riddled valleys appear immediately. These wildlands give us so much: fresh air, peace and quiet, natural resources and recreational opportunities. As you peer out over the landscape, the remains of torched trees remind us that the wildlands also take. In June 2013, the Yarnell Hill Fire blazed through this rugged territory, taking the lives of 19 firefighters. These brave men are memorialized with plaques placed roughly every 600 feet along the Hotshots Trail. Additional signage placed near benches at scenic lookouts gives information about the area's natural history, firefighting and the timeline of the Yarnell Hill Fire. The trail makes a long traverse on a ridge overlooking the fatality site.

Four hundred feet below, a Stonehenge-like circle of 19 gabions surrounds the place where the men perished. At the trail's high point, an observation deck and memorial wall where visitors from around the world leave mementos mark the beginning of the 0.75-mile Journey Trail that traces the hotshots' final trek.

This short downhill path elicits a maniacal elixir of exhilaration and numbness. Is the hike a sort of voyeurism, or a genuine offering of respect? It's hard to discern when distracted by conflicting moods egged on by the immediate astonishing beauty and the memory of utter disaster.

The fatality site sits at the mouth of a bowl-like canyon a heartbreaking half-mile from a ranch. The ugliness of the fire has mostly disintegrated, and fresh sprouts emerge from the bases of resilient shrubs that were here, then gone, then here again. The haunting site has a stone-and-chain enclosure that surrounds the spot where the firefighters made their last stand. A contemplative pathway, memorial flagpole and benches invite visitors to pay their respects and honor the lives of the 19 hotshots.

LENGTH: 7.2 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,318-5,061 feet

BEST SEASON: November-March

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take Interstate 17 north to State Route 74 (Carefree Highway). Head 30 miles west toward Wickenburg and turn right (north) on U.S. 60. Continue on U.S. 60 to the traffic circle at the Hassayampa River bridge, veer left and go north on State Route 93 to State Route 89 (White Spar Highway). Follow SR 89 toward Yarnell, go left at the split, head up the winding mountain road and turn left at the sign for the park. Roads are 100 percent paved. There's limited trailhead parking and a shuttle service is available during peak season. No fees.

HARQUAHALA PACK TRAIL

Harquahala Mountain Wilderness Area

An abandoned solar observatory on top of the 5,691-foot summit of Harquahala Mountain, the highest point in southwestern Arizona, is but one of many points of interest atop this desert peak. Stunning views of the sprawling farmlands near Wickenburg, a healthy desert tortoise population, skulking Gila monsters and ruins of an abandoned mine camp provide hours of visual interest along the narrow pack trail that spirals skyward from the desert floor.

Just below the summit, there's a mountain pass with good views of a precipitous dirt road that snakes up the massive south slopes of the mountain. In addition to being a favorite destination for brave 4-by-4 enthusiasts, the bumpy route also is used by Central Arizona Project workers to access the array of solar-powered equipment on the apex that regulates the flow of water in the CAP canals that crisscross the Metro Phoenix area.

LENGTH: 11.5 miles round trip

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 2,320-5,691 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restroom

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take U.S. 60 (Grand Avenue) west toward Wickenburg. From Wickenburg, continue on U.S.60 for 14 miles to the little town of Aguila. Between mile markers 70 and 71, look for a gate on the left and a small brown "Trail" sign and turn onto the dirt road. You'll need to open the latched gate and close it behind you. Follow the "Trail" signs for 2.2 miles to the trailhead.

HASSAYAMPA RIVER PRESERVE

Wickenburg

WICKENBURG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
See page 252.

LENGTH: 2.54 miles (six short trails)

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: 1,900-1,980 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

HOURS: Hours vary by season. Visit the website or call ahead.

FACILITIES: restrooms, visitor center

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to Carefree Highway (State Route 74) at exit 223. Turn left (toward Wickenburg) and continue 30 miles to U.S. 60. Turn right (north) and continue 6 miles to the Conservancy turnoff on the left near milepost 114.

Raccoon Tracks
A common resident near streams and lakes, this nocturnal critter eats insects, fish, fruits and carrion, and is a notorious trash can raider.

Tucked between U.S. 60 and BNSF railroad tracks on the outskirts of Wickenburg, an enchanting forest thrives in a rare riparian corridor of an "upside-down" river.

Like many desert waterways, the Hassayampa River – which runs 100 miles from Prescott to the Gila River southwest of Buckeye – flows underground except in only a few places, thus earning its Yavapai moniker "upside-down" river.

One place in the river's course where water flows year-round is the Hassayampa River Preserve. More than 2 miles of hiking trails wind through this 700+-acre property. The paths range in difficulty from barrier-free (Palm Lake Trail) to mildly challenging (Lykes Lookout), and each showcases a particular aspect of the site's ecological diversity. The most wild of the trails is River Ramble, which wanders along the waterway in a tangle of gigantic cottonwoods and Goodding's willows with a cacophony of birdsong drifting through the canopy. It's easy to spot herons and other waterfowl lurking among cattails. Along the muddy banks, a frenzy of raccoon, opossum, skunk and fox prints betray the critters skulking in the underbrush.

Other preserve trails focus on endangered mesquite bosques and a spring-fed lake with water-loving vegetation. It's no wonder it's a magnet for birds both common and rare. In February, cedar Waxwings and yellow-rumped warblers show off flicks of lemony plumage through trees and shrubs. More common arboreal creatures like brilliant scarlet Northern cardinals and vociferous curve-billed thrashers add familiar sounds to the bird convention. Enjoy hiking or bird-watching on your own or join a guided tour. Either way, plan on spending several hours exploring this incredible roadside gem.

HUALAPAI MOUNTAIN PARK

Kingman

In Arizona's northwest corner, an archipelago of "biological sky islands" juts from the desert around the town of Kingman, providing cool respite for heat-weary hikers.

The roads and trails that ascend into the razorback ridges and rounded granite pinnacles of the Hualapai Mountains glide up from arid foothills through vegetation life zones of chaparral, pine-oak, mixed conifer and fir-aspen. Occupying a band of high-elevation cool air and shady forests, the sprawling recreational hub of Hualapai Mountain Park makes exploring this diverse sphere of outdoor wonders a cinch. The 2,300-acre park offers camping, picnic sites and more than 10 miles of hiking trails.

There's so much to see and do here that you'll want to pitch a tent, park an RV or splurge on "glamping" in one of the rustic rental cabins built by the Civilian Conservation Corps. With your base camp established, grab a map from the ranger station and hit the trails. The beautifully illustrated map, which complements the well-signed routes, corresponds with numbered points along the trails and has tidbits on history and natural features.

If you enjoy climbing to high summits, there's plenty to keep you busy as trails lead to Hayden Peak (8,390 feet), Hualapai Peak (8,417 feet) and Aspen Peak (8,124 feet), while numerous overlooks with comfy benches offer casual ways to view the ring of mountain ranges flanking the park. The park's signature trek – the 4.3-mile Potato Patch Loop – begins at the main trail junction (No. 4 on the map) and forms sort of a wagon wheel around the site with spokes connecting to major roads and trails. The loop winds through thick forests, exposed edges and massive stone outcroppings with expansive views all the way around.

An optional 1.26-mile round-trip hike up the Aspen Peak Trail leads to Dean Peak Overlook (7,950 feet), where you can relax and enjoy the vistas or scramble to the true summit – a short haul that requires route-finding and some hand-over-foot climbing.

LENGTH: 4.3-mile loop (5.56 with Aspen Peak)

RATING: moderate-difficult

ELEVATION: 6,486-7,950 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

FEE: $10 day-use daily fee per vehicle

FACILITIES: restrooms nearby

GETTING THERE:

6250 Hualapai Mountain Rd., Kingman

From Phoenix, travel north on Interstate 17 to State Route 74 (Carefree Highway) exit 223. Head west on SR 74 to U.S. 60, turn right and continue to the U.S. 93 junction in Wickenburg. Take U.S. 93 north to Interstate 40, head west to the DW Ranch Road exit 59, turn left and follow the signs to the park.

Canada Violet
Blooms: April-September

KAISER SPRING CANYON

Somewhere North of Nothing, AZ

It's a bit of a drive from Metro Phoenix to Kaiser Spring Canyon, but the return on fuel investment pays multiple dividends. The drive along U.S. 93 traverses two canyon-spanning bridges, a swath of Joshua trees and a neck-craning 4.3-second flyby of the "town" of Nothing before the trailhead turnoff for one of Arizona's quirkiest hikes.

Because this is not your normal sort of hike, a few words of advice are in order. First, be on the lookout for hazards underfoot, specifically quicksand, bighorn sheep droppings, wild burro poo and cow pies. Second, the (in)famous hot spring on this hike is no five-star spa, and nude soaking is de rigueur. Finally, this canyon is prone to flooding, so do not attempt this hike after heavy rain or during maximum spring runoff season.

Getting into the canyon is the trickiest part. Here's how: From the parking area gate, there are two dirt roads heading toward the bridge. Take the left one and hike 0.1 mile to where it meets the edge of the canyon. Locate the white BLM post that marks the beginning of the descent path and carefully hike down the short, steep trail into the canyon.

Inside the canyon the trail is a maze of 4-by-4 roads weaving through a geological stew of boulders, river rock and sandbars. There are several distinct passages along the hike, beginning with "the catacombs," a wide wash lined with banks of crypt-like depressions. Soon, the canyon enters "the narrows," where vertical stone escarpments soar hundreds of feet above the trail. Here, look for remnants of mining operations and a shallow, water-carved cave.

Beyond the narrows, the trail enters "warm spring alley," where a 99-degree fountain of water issues from a wall of granite. A pool big enough to accommodate 2-3 bathers contains the flow. From the spring, continue hiking south 0.2 mile to "the confluence" with Burro Creek. Here, the trail transitions into a cross-country creek-and-boulder hop, and although it's possible to hike deep into the gorge, the confluence is a popular turnaround point.

LENGTH: 1.5 miles one way to the hot spring

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,020-1,755 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to the Carefree Highway (State Route 74) exit 223B. Head west (left) and continue 30 miles to U.S. 60, head north (right) and continue a few miles to the U.S. 93 traffic circle in Wickenburg. Veer right (north) through the circle and continue 65 miles north on U.S. 93 to the Kaiser Canyon bridge, located 5.5 miles north of the turnoff for Burro Creek Campground.

Cross the bridge and make an immediate right onto a dirt road just past milepost 135. Follow the dirt road roughly 0.1 mile to a barbed-wire gate where the road splits. Stay straight, pass through the gate and park in the turnouts near the bridge.

SOPHIE'S FLAT "A" LOOP

Wickenburg

WICKENBURG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
See ad page 252.

Sophie Burden made wicked good beer biscuits – an accidental concoction she created when camping companions guzzled the milk she was saving for the recipe. Undeterred, she rustled up some old-fashioned western ingenuity, tossed a can of brew into the batter instead, and voilà! A Wickenburg icon was born.

Dubbed the "First Lady of Arizona innkeeping" by former governor Paul Fannin (1959-1965), Sophie ran popular Wickenburg dude retreat Remuda Ranch (where her biscuits were legend), frequently taking guests on cookouts to the flats, hills and trails surrounding the property.

The ranch was sold in 1968 and is now a high-end treatment facility for eating disorders, where they likely do not serve ale-addled quick breads. The site is private, but the peripheral stomping grounds remain open to recreational hikers and equestrians.

A roomy, rustic trailhead with separate parking areas for cars and horse trailers anchors the site's 7.1-mile main "A" loop trail. The hiking here is a leisurely amble through a hilly landscape shaped by mining, ranching and harsh desert conditions. This area northeast of Wickenburg consists of 9.4 miles of non-motorized trails laid out like a wagon wheel, looping among shared motorized-use dirt roads. A maze of washes, Jeep roads and unnamed trails intersect the route, so be sure to follow the "A" signs to stay on course.

Tarantula
Habitat: desert, grassland, deep burrows
Diet: insects, small lizards
Facts: Males can live 10-12 years, while females can live up to 24 years. Females are stockier and brown, males are more gangly and mostly black in color.

LENGTH: 7.1-mile loop

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 2,400-2,740 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restroom, map kiosk, horse staging area

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, travel north on Interstate 17 to Carefree Highway/State Route 74 (exit 223) and go 30 miles west toward Wickenburg. Turn right at U.S. 60. Continue to just before the Hassayampa River bridge traffic circle in Wickenburg and turn right on El Recreo Drive. Go 0.25 mile, veer right onto Constellation Road and continue 2.7 miles to Blue Tank Road on the left. Follow Blue Tank Road 1.3 miles to trailhead. Last 4 miles are sedan-friendly dirt roads.

Springerville
Arizona

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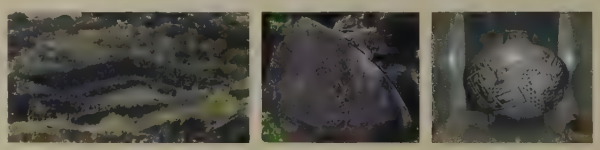

Museum Hours: Tuesday through Saturday
8 AM – 4 PM (year-round)
Free Museum Admission!

Guided Tours: Tuesday through Saturday
March through November (weather permitting)

9 AM & 1 PM | Arrive 30 minutes early for video
$10 adults | $8 seniors 60+ | $5 youth under 18

Good walking/hiking shoes recommended (no open-toe shoes)
Bring water, hat, sunscreen, etc. Allow 2 - 2.5 hours for tour.

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WHITE MOUNTAINS

Pinetop-
Lakeside

Springerville

Big Lake

Show Low

Apache-
Sitgreaves
National Forest

Volcanic
Highlands

Wildlife
Viewing

Lakes and
Rivers

Showy Milkweed
Blooms: July-August

BECKER LAKE WILDLIFE AREA: RIVER WALK TRAIL

Springerville

LENGTH: 1.2 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,920-6,945 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Springerville, go 1 mile west on U.S. 60 (Main Street) to the parking area on the left.

A short, meandering stretch of the Little Colorado River is a better place thanks to the introduction of coconut matting and recycled Christmas trees.

These biodegradable materials are just two of the many tools being used by conservation agencies (Arizona Game & Fish Department, Apache Natural Resource Conservation District, United States Department of Agriculture, United States Army Corps of Engineers, Arizona Department of Water Resources and Arizona Water Protection Fund) to restore riverbank stability and improve wildlife habitats. Project managers concede that some of these rehabilitative practices are more successful than others, leaving the verdicts up to visiting hikers who can draw conclusions based on interpretive signage along the experimental test grounds.

The biodegradable mats and trees augured into the riverbank are hardly noticeable and are slowing erosion to help reinstate the river's natural flows for a healthier riparian ecosystem. A robust community of water-loving bullrush, grasses and showy milkweed at water's edge have taken root in the mesh of introduced materials. This is providing shelter for nesting waterfowl and building supplies for busy beavers. In fact, so many birds visit the area that the site has been designated an Important Bird Area by Audubon Arizona. One shady section of the 1.2-mile streamside trail exhibits the sun-dappled ambience of a Monet garden with water-caressing willows and a wooden footbridge. Where the path enters the surrounding floodplain and open rangeland, it becomes easy to see how precious this ribbon of moisture is to sustaining life in the White Mountains.

Although this short, close-to-town hike isn't likely to get you into your target heart rate zone, its educational value and profound beauty make it a worthwhile diversion – coconut mats and all.

Yellow-Headed Blackbird

BIG SPRINGS ENVIRONMENTAL STUDY AREA

Pinetop-Lakeside

Worth the trip if only to view the swarms of Technicolor dragonflies, this wetland preserve holds many fascinating attractions.

Located just off the main drag in Pinetop-Lakeside, the pristine marsh, with its cattail- and watercress-cluttered ponds and pine-ringed perimeters, is a haven for wildlife. Fed by the perennial waters of two creeks and a spring that gushes 800-1,200 gallons of water per minute, the 40-acre property is protected and maintained with lottery dollars from the Arizona Game & Fish Department's Heritage Fund & Watchable Wildlife Program.

Interpretive signs along the easy trail explain how the springs work and the importance of preserving riparian habitats. Benches in shady spots near the water are handy for relaxing while watching and listening to the local waterfowl. Hawks, jays, eagles, osprey, bluebirds, mallards and blackbirds aren't shy about putting on a show, so you won't have to wait long to see a variety of birds dive-bombing for insects over crystal clear waters.

LENGTH: 0.5-mile loop

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,950 feet

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

In Pinetop-Lakeside, travel east on State Route 260 to Woodland Road (located past the turnoff for Rainbow Lake). Turn right (south). Continue 0.6 mile to the trailhead on the left.

BLUE RIDGE TRAIL via BILLY CREEK CONNECTOR

Pinetop-Lakeside

The cool, spring-fed waters of Billy and Thompson creeks anchor this deeply wooded mountain circuit. Perfect for late summer or autumn, the White Mountains Trail System (TRACKS) route is just off Pinetop-Lakeside's main drag, making for a quick up-and-around day hike with lots of variety.

One of the beautiful things about the Blue Ridge Trail is that it can be accessed via its two trailheads or by way of Ice Cave Trail, Springs Trail or Billy Creek Connector. If creekside trekking is what you're after, the latter provides the best water exposure.

Along its 0.75-mile, course, Billy Creek Connector is augmented with footpaths leading to bramble-embellished quiet spaces at the water's edge. Go right at the Blue Ridge Trail loop junction and hike through 2 miles of fragrant wet meadows to the Springs Trail turnoff. It's the beginning of a 600-foot climb to the summit of Blue Ridge Mountain through airy oak-pine woodlands, red earth, volcanic boulders and marauding cattle. Blue diamond markers and location beacons help keep hikers on course where dirt fire roads muddle the map. Occasionally, tree cover parts just enough to reveal White Mountain vistas. However, do not expect the stereotypical treeless, wind-in-your-face, summit-conquering experience – there are just too many trees.

If you have the stamina, take a side trip on the Ice Cave Trail, which leaves from the return leg of the loop. It's roughly 2 miles one way (near milepost 8) to the lava tube cave. Would-be spelunkers be warned: Hiking/climbing into the cave is discouraged.

Pleated Gentian
Blooms: August-October

LENGTH: 9.9-mile loop

RATING: moderate

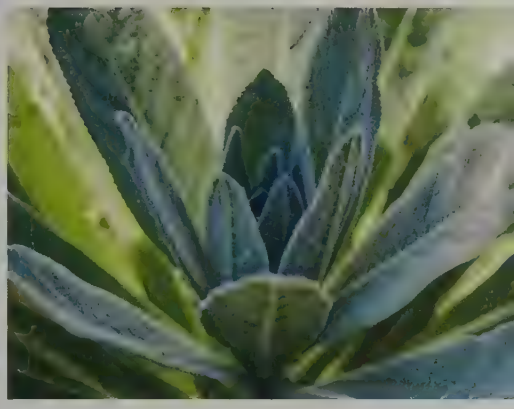
ELEVATION: 6,880-7,656 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

Billy Creek Trailhead:

In Pinetop-Lakeside, go south on State Route 260 (White Mountain Boulevard) to milepost 252. Turn left onto Pinecrest Road and continue 0.1 mile to the trailhead. Parking is limited and for passenger vehicles only. Do not block private drives.



Common Mullein
Blooms: June-September

COUNTRY CLUB TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

LENGTH: 3.25-mile loop or 4.25 miles with the Pat Mullen Mountain spur

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,200-7,612 feet

BEST SEASON: April-November

GETTING THERE:

In Pinetop-Lakeside, go south on State Route 260 (White Mountain Boulevard) to the traffic signal at Buck Springs Road at milepost 355. Continue 0.6 mile and turn left onto to Sky Hi Road (Forest Road 182). Follow Sky Hi Road 1.8 miles to the 632 trailhead on the right at the junction with FR 185. All access roads are sedan-friendly.

The White Mountains TRACKS Trail System is a loopy network of non-motorized paths that spans a strip of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest from Linden to Vernon in northeastern Arizona's White Mountains. The approachable, customizable trails offer dozens of options ranging from easy strolls just steps from town to long-distance backwoods excursions.

Eleven major loops are tethered by connector trails that enable seamless travel for challenging day hikes or multi-day backpacking. At the heart of the system, the towns of Show Low and Pinetop-Lakeside provide plenty of jumping-off points for exploring this diverse system that encompasses arid pinyon-juniper grasslands, humid creekside corridors and fragrant pine woodlands.

A good introductory TRACKS choice is the Country Club Trail. Located just a few miles off State Route 260 in Pinetop-Lakeside, the 3.25-mile loop is a pleasant walk through shady forests and spring-fed meadows. From the trailhead kiosk, the hike begins as a mellow meander in sun-speckled pine-oak woodlands. Like all TRACKS trails, this one has excellent signage. Tree tags point the way, and location markers placed roughly every quarter mile correspond with maps available online and at the trailhead and let hikers know exactly where they are on the route. Where the trail crosses the many dirt roads in the area, be sure to find the next marker before proceeding to keep from wandering off course.

About a mile in, the trail passes a gate and enters Whitcomb Pasture. From June through October, cattle graze in the dewy fields nurtured by the dribbles of Whitcomb and Chipmunk springs. Beyond the meadows, the trail begins a mild climb on the flanks of Pat Mullen Mountain.

For glimpses of classic White Mountains vistas, take the optional half-mile spur path that ascends 300 feet to the 7,612-foot summit. Although the short climb is smothered in pines, oaks and a few spectacular specimens of ancient alligator junipers, views of the surrounding terrain can be seen through breaks in the foliage. The massive form of Mount Baldy (11,403 feet), Blue Ridge Mountain (7,656 feet) and numerous cinder cone volcanoes jut above seemingly endless swaths of trees.

Although views are sparse on the summit, huge basalt shelves and jumbled boulders provide ample seating for a snack break or breather before taking on the final easy mile back to the trailhead.

Harebell
Blooms: June-September

LENGTH: 7.5 miles one way

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 8,200-9,350 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

Gabaldon Trailhead (as described here):

From State Route 260 17 miles west of Eagar, turn onto State Route 273, which is located just past milepost 377 and signed for Sunrise Ski Area. Go 11.9 miles south to the trailhead on the right (0.4 mile past the East Baldy trailhead). Park in the turnouts before entering the campground. To get to the trailhead, hike 0.2 mile up SR 273 to Forest Road 409, turn left and make a left onto the unsigned red cinder trail just past the cattle guard. SR 273 beyond the ski area is not plowed in winter and may be closed due to snow between October and May.

Greer Trailhead:

From State Route 260, 9.6 miles west of Eagar, turn onto State Route 373 (Greer) and continue 5.5 miles south to the trailhead on the left. Parking is limited to 5 cars and there's a restroom. There's an immediate crossing of the river that's easy in low water, but may require wading.

EAST FORK TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

If you drive down State Route 373/ Main Street through the town of Greer to near road's end, you'll find yourself at the banks of the West Fork of the Little Colorado River and the trailhead for the East Fork Trail 95.

Yes, the East Fork Trail begins at the West Fork, and this woodsy streamside spot is the most popular place to begin the hike that rambles through alpine meadows sprawled between two creeks that originate on the slopes of Mount Baldy. Although the drive through town is scenic, it's often crowded, and parking can sometimes be a challenge. Couple that with the fact that accessing trail 95 here requires an immediate creek crossing that might cause unprepared hikers to turn back before even starting. There's a work-around, though: If you start the hike from the Gabaldon Horse Campground at the edge of Mount Baldy Wilderness, you'll avoid the traffic and parking headaches.

The southern terminus of Trail 95 shares space with Railroad Grade Trail, a 21-mile route that follows the repurposed track of the defunct Apache Railroad. This first section follows a raised cinder bed through a canopy of spruce and aspens that gradually spills into an open alpine meadow with expansive views. From June through September, abundant moisture and dappled sunshine provide perfect conditions for wildflowers. Take time to appreciate the delicate lavender harebells and dainty clustered blooms of autumn dwarf gentian that pop up among swaying forbs and shrubby cinquefoil.

At the 1.5-mile point, the trail encounters Colter Reservoir. More a giant stock pond than a lake, the trapped water is a favorite bovine gathering place. Sometimes the cows congregate on the trail, but when given their space, they'll usually move aside. Pass a cattle gate (leave it open or closed as found) and make an immediate right turn onto a cow-trampled single-track path marked by posts and cairns. From here, the trail follows the twisted trickle of the East Fork of the Little Colorado River for awhile before ascending into the hills. Over the next miles, the route passes dewy ciénegas and patches of fir-spruce forest. Evidence of the 2011 Wallow Fire manifests in charred tree trunks that stand like fragile matchsticks doomed to succumb to the next winter storm. The forest is renewing itself as fresh growth springs from the ashes.

As the trail approaches Greer, take a last look at White Mountain vistas from Amberon Point before scrambling 600 feet downhill to get your feet wet crossing the West Fork.

GHOST OF THE COYOTE TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

One of the coolest trail names in Arizona teases of a place steeped in magic and mystery, but the reality of the subject path is decidedly earthy. Ghost of the Coyote Trail sounds like the kind of name a bunch of weary ranchers would come up with while sharing stale campfire coffee, a flask of booze and a pot of beans. The experience of hiking the trail aligns with this vision. With its imagination-seizing moniker, the 13-mile, double-loop trail – located just a mile north of State Route 260 in the town of Linden – drips with cowboy culture in a classic rangeland setting.

The 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire (the second largest blaze in Arizona history), stripped many of the big trees along the route, leaving precious little shade. The land is recovering nicely, and most of the charred trees have been harvested or have disintegrated into tangled piles in open prairies fringed with survivor pine-oak thickets and isolated pockets of high desert yucca and cacti.

Although there's not a lot of elevation change, the trail ascends several knolls for sweet views of Eastern Arizona's White Mountains. From the high points, the hazy, low-slung profile of Mount Baldy (11,403 feet) and the distinctive flat top of Escudilla Mountain (10,912 feet) can be seen poking above a jagged horizon. The well-marked trail follows old ranch and logging roads sharing several junctions with the Maverick Motorized Trail system.

Many unmarked primitive paths that crisscross the land can cause minor confusion. Adopted by the White Mountain Trails System, the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest route is now marked with white diamond blazes. To stay on track, be sure to located the next marker before moving ahead. The trail also has location markers posted every quarter mile that correspond with downloadable White Mountains Trail System maps. If you pay attention, it's nearly impossible to get lost here.

Another appealing feature of this route is that it can be done as either a 13-mile giant loop or two shorter ones. Beginning from the main trailhead on Burton Road, follow the access trail 0.2-mile to the beginning of Loop 1 and head out in either direction. This compact, 5.71-mile option packs in a great deal of variety with stock tanks, meadows, vista points, shady enclaves and inevitable cattle encounters. Roughly halfway through the loop, look for the shortcut passage marked with yellow dots to circle back to the start point. Otherwise, continue onto Loop 2 as it enters sunny grasslands and sprawling ranches.

Big skies and uninterrupted views define this airy swath of cattle country. You'll pass grazing cows, horse farms, rustic barbed-wire gates and plenty more stock tanks. There are good opportunities to spot wildlife – maybe even a ghostly coyote skulking in the scrub.

LENGTH:

Loop 1: 5.71 miles

Loop 2: 7.99 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,000-6,200 feet

BEST SEASON: May-June

GETTING THERE:

Main Trailhead (short loop access):

From the State Route 87/260 junction in Payson, go 80 miles east on SR 260 to the town of Linden. Just before milepost 333 (8 miles west of Show Low), turn left onto Burton Road (Forest Road 134) and continue 1 mile to the trailhead on the left.

Long Loop access:

From State Route 260 in Linden, go north on Pinedale Road (Forest Road 129) at milepost 227 and continue 1.8 miles to the gate at Capps Ranch Road.

GREENS PEAK

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

LENGTH: 2 or 4 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 9,520-10,133 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Pinetop, travel east on State Route 260 (Toward McNary). Continue to roughly 3 miles past SR 273 to Forest Road 117 near milepost 380 on the left (about a mile past the Railroad Grade trailhead). Follow FR 117 north for 3 miles to a "Y" junction at FR 61, where a sign states "Greens Peak 2 Miles." Park here for a 4-mile round-trip hike, or veer left and drive another mile to the next "Y" intersection at FR 61/61C for a 2-mile hike. Roads are maintained cinder and passable by sedan.

More popular with hang gliders than hikers, this volcanic peak northwest of Greer is a gem famous for its windy conditions.

The peak is an extinct cinder cone volcano surrounded by myriad geological curiosities like the mima mounds. One of the enduring mysteries of White Mountain geology is the origin of the mounds. Rodents, embedded root systems and creatures from outer space all have been credited with making these roundish, 2-to-9-foot-high lumps of gravel in the meadows surrounding Greens Peak, the high point of the Springerville volcanic field at 10,133 feet. The prevailing theory is that these curious features are remnants of a glacial ice field that receded some 25,000 years ago, leaving behind a landscape that smacks more of Iceland than Arizona. A red cinder road etched into the slopes that's used to access the fire tower and communication equipment on the top also serves as the trail.

Rocky Mountain Iris
Blooms: May-September

At the apex, stroll around for extraordinary views of the cinder cone-dotted countryside. Scope out future hiking destinations like Pole Knoll, Railroad Grade and Mount Baldy. You can also see the scars of the 2011 Wallow Fire.

INDIAN SPRINGS TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

Late summer in Arizona's White Mountains is prime time for wildflower viewing. Cooler evenings take the edge off daytime heat, and mornings break in a crisp, dewy dampness that hints of autumn and nurtures a colorful spectacle of blooming plants.

Fields of sunflowers dress roadside pastures, making the annual bloom accessible to anybody willing to take a drive and pull off onto a random dirt road. But if you want deeper access to high-altitude botanical treasures, lace up your hiking boots, strap on a backpack and hit the Indian Springs Trail near Big Lake. The 2011 Wallow Fire roared across this classic trail of fir-spruce woodlands, taking out some segments but leaving others mostly intact. The upside to the loss of coniferous canopies is a sunlight-generated surge in wildflower proliferation.

The best part about loop trails like this one is the mix of sun, shade, hydrology and micro climates that produce a variety of flowering plants. The bonanza begins right from the get-go in a bud-dotted meadow. Sun-loving fleabane and harebells bob in mountain breezes. Beyond the trailhead, the path moves into a section of survivor pines and the filtered-light domain of species like Richardson's Geranium, pleated gentian and brilliant orange paintbrush. A passage of wild red raspberries and ferns culminates at the junction for the optional half-mile spur trail that leads to Big Lake Lookout. Although the fire tower that stood on this rocky knob succumbed to the blaze, there's a silver lining: Lake views are easier to see through toasted stumps and shrubs.

The next section of the hike passes through an old-growth forest of fir, spruce and mature aspens. This darker, wetter space favors Canada violets, mushrooms and blue-eyed grass. At the 1-mile point, the reliable trickle of Spillman Spring creates a water garden of clovers and seep monkey flowers that grow in bright clumps in and around the rustic wooden troughs set up to catch the flow. Fire damage is much more visible throughout the remainder of the hike. Thickets of aspen saplings account for much of the regrowth. In these areas, look for common mullein, Apache lobelia and spurred gentian.

Indian Spring appears as a mucky pond at the 2.5-mile point. The swamp's fringe of Rocky Mountain irises that bloom May through June are long past prime by mid-summer. Beyond the loop's halfway mark, marshy areas define the trail's lowest elevation. Runoff collects in soggy bogs and funnels into streamlets that feed the tributaries of the Black River. These swales are the habitat of false hellebore, horse mint, New Mexican checker mallow, lupine and penstemon.

At 5 miles, there's an option to add on the 6-mile round trip West Fork of the Black River Trail 628 before the route curves back to the start point.

LENGTH: 7.5-mile loop (8.5 miles with lookout side trip)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 8,600 – 9,415 feet

BEST SEASON: May - October

GETTING THERE:

From the Hon-Dah casino in Pinetop-Lakeside go 19.6 miles east on State Route 260 to State Route 273, just past milepost 377 and signed for Sunrise Ski Area. Go 19.2 miles south on SR 273 (turns into Forest Road 249 past the Big Lake turnoff) to Forest Road 249E, turn right and continue 0.4 mile to the trailhead on the left. Roads are paved up to FR 249E which is good gravel.

Pleated Gentian
Blooms: August-October

Poison Milkweed
Blooms: May-September

JACQUES MARSH WILDLIFE AREA

Pinetop-Lakeside

What began as a creative approach to wastewater management has bloomed into thriving wetlands on a windswept White Mountains grassland. This 93-acre site is a complex of ponds, nesting islands and wet meadows that attract swarms of birds as well as elk, deer, coyotes, turkeys and bears.

Visitors can hike along the cattail-choked berms and gravel roads that criss-cross the area. The going is easy, but gopher and badger holes are potential hazards, so keep an eye on your footing. The created wetlands of Jacques Marsh are fed by treated, reclaimed water pumped in from the Pinetop-Lakeside wastewater treatment plant. Don't worry – although it's not advisable to drink the marsh water, it's perfectly safe to wander around it. The only aroma is that of earthy water plants and juniper-studded prairies.

LENGTH: variable; the circumference is just under 3 miles; if you hike all the berms, up to 4 miles

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,720 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

In Pinetop-Lakeside, travel south on State Route 260 (White Mountain Blvd.) to milepost 350 and the traffic signal at Porter Mountain Road. Turn left and go 1.5 miles north on Porter Mountain (a.k.a. Penrod Road) to Juniper Drive on the left. Follow this paved/gravel/dirt road 0.6 mile (ignore the side roads, keep straight and pass over 2 cattle guards) to the trailhead on the right. The last half mile is on bumpy dirt. Low-clearance vehicles can park along the road if necessary and walk the remaining distance.

LAND OF THE PIONEERS TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

The bucolic pastures and quiet backwoods of Vernon, Arizona (population: 122), is the last place you'd expect to be the scene of a vile triple homicide. It happened, though, and the sad story is standard fare in local lore. Pioneers began settling the rural community in the eastern White Mountains in the 1890s, making a living on the surrounding lumber-rich forests. Legend has it that among the early pioneers were three women who lived in a log cabin just south of town. Back-fence chatter about the women hiding a large amount of money on their property eventually reached the ears of criminals. They murdered the women and ransacked their homestead, but found no riches. Today, all that remains of the tragic scene are crumbling stone foundations and piles of rusty-nailed planks.

The historical homestead is one of many points of interest on the Land of the Pioneers Trail 651 located 5 miles south of Vernon. Constructed in a customizable, triple-loop format, 651 wanders through a mix of deep pine-oak woodlands and airy, juniper-dotted meadows.

The most scenic elements of the hike are found on the north leg of the 8.7-mile circumference loop. From the trailhead, the north leg departs at the kiosk following a dirt road. Just past the first of several cattle gates, the trail bends left onto a single track. Like all White Mountains Trail System routes, this one is well-maintained and outfitted with location markers placed roughly every quarter mile. The markers correspond with downloadable maps, so you'll always know where you are on the trail. White diamond tags denote the main outer loop, while yellow dots indicate shortcuts for the three inner loops.

The hike to the cabin site is just over a mile. The first ruins appear at location marker L30, and the main cabin ruins are a quarter mile farther at marker L29. This is also where the shortcut for Loop 1 veers off for a 3.5-mile option. Next up on the big loop, look for a short spur path on the left near marker L26 that leads to Section 31 Tank. The secluded water hole reflects the sky and teems with multicolored dragonflies.

After another 0.75-mile, the trail traces a rocky box canyon with steep drop-offs and the first glimpses of eroding cinder cones in the Springerville volcanic field. It's one of the prettiest spots on the trail. Beyond, the trail begins its ascent up the flanks of Ecks Mountain. To bypass this challenging section, take the signed shortcut for a 6.8-mile moderate trek.

Sweat expended on Ecks Mountain and an optional short spur that leads to a vista point pays off with excellent panoramic views of Greens Peak and rolling prairies that stretch into New Mexico. A set of tight switchbacks mitigate the vertical descent down to the south leg of the loop. The final miles back to the trailhead undulate through boulder-studded ravines, moist drainages and fields of wildflowers.

LENGTH:

Circumference Loop: 8.7 miles

Loop 1: 3.5 miles

Loop 1-2 combo: 6.8 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,220-7,864 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the junction of U.S. 60 and State Route 260 in Show Low, go 19.4 miles east on U.S. 60 to County Road 3140 (Vernon Road/Forest Road 224). Turn right and continue 5 miles south. Turn right onto FR 5 and drive 0.5 mile to the trailhead on the left. Forest roads are gravel and dirt, suitable for passenger vehicles.

OCOTE TRAIL

White Mountain Grasslands Wildlife Area

Have you ever wondered where money from the Arizona Lottery ends up? Besides lining the pockets of a few lucky winners, lottery proceeds also support numerous public programs including the Arizona Game & Fish Department Heritage Fund Program for threatened, endangered and sensitive species and their habitats. For the past 20 years, the fund has made many positive contributions to the state's wildlife and natural areas conservation efforts while preserving public access and recreational opportunities.

One success story is the White Mountain Grasslands Wildlife Area near the town of Eagar. The 2,850-acre site is comprised of two former ranch properties acquired in 1999 and 2000. The 2.6-mile Ocote trail (named for one of the ranches) wraps around pinion-juniper woodlands, riparian habitat, ponds, a wet meadow, open grasslands, a historical log bunkhouse and a rustic ranch house with a windmill. Interpretive signs placed long the trails give details about the surrounding plants and animals, and the how the property's ecosystems help wildlife thrive.

Although the trail is short and can be hiked in about an hour, a better plan is to allow plenty of time to sit quietly at strategically placed viewing areas to catch sight of the pronghorn antelopes, elk, squirrels, foxes and dozens of bird species that inhabit this profoundly diverse slice of White Mountain terrain.

Kick back at a shady picnic table and contemplate all those bum lottery tickets you've angrily torn up over the years. They weren't losers after all.

LENGTH: 2.6-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,440-7,587 feet

HOURS: sunrise to sunset daily

BEST SEASON: May - October

GETTING THERE:

From Eagar, travel 5 miles west on State Route 260 to County Road 4128 (signed for Springerville Transfer Station). Turn right and follow the paved road 0.6 mile and take the left fork onto a gravel road. Continue 2.4 miles, then turn left at a fork and pass over a cattle guard signed for Arizona Game & Fish Department property. Drive 0.3 mile to the trailhead on the left. Gravel road is suitable for carefully driven sedans.

OSPREY CONNECTOR to ICE CAVE

Pinetop-Lakeside

Of all the wonderful routes in the White Mountain Trail System, Ice Cave Trail 608 is a hiker favorite.

Known for its easy tread and cool, pine-juniper forests, the trail's big attraction is the eponymous lava tube located midway along the path. Because of its popularity, the trailhead fills up quickly, which is why the Osprey Connector 636C is gaining recognition as an alternative access route.

A relatively new addition to the 25 trails within the system, this one was built to link the Timber Mesa and Blue Ridge Mountain clusters of trails. But to view this woodland traipse as just a means to an end is to miss the point – it holds its own as a standalone hike. Passing through the gorge and surrounding wetlands of Porter Creek, the trail makes a steppingstone-assisted water crossing before ascending along the ridgeline above Scott Reservoir.

Since visiting the White Mountain ice cave is a hiking itch that must be scratched, here's how to use this route to get to the prize: Begin by hiking 0.5 mile on the Timber Mesa Trail 636. Turn right onto the Osprey Connector and follow it 2.5 miles to the Ice Cave Trail junction. From here, it's 0.5 mile to the cave. Despite the hype (and to the chagrin of many hikers), the cave itself is little more than a glorified sinkhole – with no ice. The forest service has fenced off the cave for preservation, and it's smart to avoid climbing into the potentially dangerous abyss.

LENGTH: 7 miles roundtrip to the cave and back

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,350-6,890 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

In Pinetop-Lakeside, go south on State Route 260 (White Mountain Boulevard) to the Porter Mountain Road traffic light at milepost 350. Turn left and continue 2.2 miles to the Timber Mesa trailhead, or 2.4 miles to additional parking at a gate along the road. Parking at the gate cuts 2 miles off the roundtrip distance.

Torrey's Crag Lily
Blooms: August

Wild Strawberry
Blooms: May-October

LENGTH: 18 miles of interconnected loop trails

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: 8,700-9,700 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic ramadas

GETTING THERE:

From the intersection of State Routes 260/73 in Pinetop-Lakeside (near the Hon-Dah Casino), continue 25 miles east on SR 260 to the turnoff on the right just beyond milepost 383.

POLE KNOLL TRAILS

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

Conveniently located off State Route 260 near Greer, the Pole Knoll Recreation Area is a year-round destination for outdoor sports. The site's 12 trails combine for 18 miles of both cross-country ski routes in winter and hike-bike-horse paths in summer. Nordic ski symbols mark the trails. Green circles indicate easy trails, blue squares are for moderate and black diamonds mark the most difficult.

The trail system loops through alpine meadows, pine forests and aspen-fir groves. Although most trails offer moderate grades and well-engineered climbs, the diminished oxygen of this high-elevation site tends to slow down visitors from the lowlands who may find themselves huffing and puffing even on easier routes.

You may need to suck more air here, but persistence pays off with gorgeous mountain and lake vistas. Having to catch your breath every so often is the perfect excuse to stop and savor views of classic White Mountain peaks like 11,421-foot Mount Baldy and the 10,133-foot, tower-cluttered slopes of Greens Peak, the tallest cinder cone in the Springerville volcanic field. (Yes, you can hike its edge-hugging summit road).

Route options include the easy 6.2-mile Pole Knoll Loop that traces the base of the aspen-embellished volcanic hill, and the more difficult Summit (2.1 miles) and View Point (1.3 miles) trails that ascend to near the top. Although trails do not go to the actual summit, peak baggers (hikers focused on reaching mountaintops) with GPS skills can easily hike cross-country to the high-point prize. Whether you trek along the base or trudge high into heavenly hypoxia, this accessible destination offers a satisfying spectrum of hiking options for all levels of experience.

RAILROAD GRADE TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

Over its 21-mile course, Railroad Grade Trail passes by five lakes, crosses three streams, and makes a creaky traverse of an old-fashioned trestle bridge.

Once used by the Apache Railroad to service bygone logging operations, the route had a brief second wind as a tourist ride before being decommissioned and repurposed into a hike/bike/horse trail. Because of its relatively flat terrain, ever-changing scenery, four trailheads, connectivity with other popular White Mountains trails and proximity to campgrounds, hiking this historical gem is doable as a long day hike or a multi-day excursion.

The cinder substrate trail runs north-south between State Route 260 and Big Lake through marshes and fir-spruce woodlands flanked by the volcanic massif of Mount Baldy ridge, which at 11,420 feet is the second highest point in Arizona that you can hike to legally.

Midway through the trek, the route passes through a tunnel under State Route 273 and emerges at Sheep Crossing, a popular fishing spot on the West Fork of the Little Colorado River. It makes an easy ascent up toward the West Baldy Trail and the hike's highest point, where scars from the 2011 Wallow Fire paint the forest shades of gray. Heading down toward Big Lake, views of 10,912-foot Escudilla Mountain stand out among treeless grasslands punctuated with glassy ponds that attract blue heron, eagles and swarms of waterfowl. This is also cattle country, so herd encounters are guaranteed, especially along the last miles leading to the trail's southern terminus at Railroad Cove – a northern estuary of Big Lake.

Elk Rub

LENGTH: 21 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 8,950-9,350 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restrooms at north trailhead

GETTING THERE:

State Route 260 Trailhead:

From Show Low, go 36 miles east on State Route 260 to a point 1.5 miles beyond SR 273 at milepost 379. The signed trailhead is on the right. Paved roads. Restrooms.

Sheep Crossing Trailhead:

From Show Low, go 35 miles east on State Route 260 to State Route 273 at milepost 377. Turn right and go 8.8 miles south to the trailhead on the right at milepost 391. Paved roads.

Lightning Ridge Trailhead:

From SR 260, go 14.3 miles south on AZ 273 to Forest Road 116. Turn right and drive a few yards to the trailhead on the right. Trail begins across the road.

Railroad Cove at Big Lake Trailhead:

From SR 260, go 14.3 miles south on SR 273 to FR 116. Turn right and continue 2.8 miles to FR 249E, turn left and drive 1.8 miles to FR 249G. Turn left and follow the road 0.3 mile to the parking area. FR 116 and 249E/G are sedan-friendly dirt.

SHOW LOW BLUFF

White Mountains Trail System

Dedicated in June 2012, this loop route is the newest addition to the White Mountains Trail System. Because of its convenient location, short length and moderate tread, this trail is a popular choice for family jaunts and leisurely strolls.

A paved path debarking from the trailhead leads to a rustic stone bridge spanning Show Low Creek. Here, horses can sometimes be seen grazing in green pastures. Beyond the bridge, the trail enters a forest of oaks, pines and high-desert yuccas for a short climb among basalt boulders to the top of the loop, where a sign points to the Woolford trailhead. It's a bit confusing here – go right to complete the loop, or head toward Woolford to get to the bluff's high point for nice views from the juniper grasslands above town.

LENGTH: 1.5 miles

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 6,350-6,400 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

GETTING THERE:

The State Route 260/U.S. 60 junction in Show Low, go 1 mile south on SR 260 (White Mountain Blvd.) to near milepost 284 and turn left at the sign for Show Low Bluff trail.

SILVER CREEK

Show Low

Silver Creek originates from an underground spring and cuts a meandering course through bucolic White Mountain juniper grasslands. The creek is managed by Arizona Game & Fish Department and is part of an 840-acre wildlife/fish hatchery area that's open to the public for hunting, fishing and bird-watching.

Although not usually billed as a hiking destination, creekside fishermen's trails serve the needs of trekkers in search of great photo opportunities and wildlife encounters. Both banks of the short waterway are hike-able. Although the west side is less overgrown, the east side – where slender footpaths are obscured by lush grasses – offers solitude and a plethora of wet-meadow wildflowers.

LENGTH: 2.5 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,500 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

HOURS: dawn-dusk daily; closed Thanksgiving and Christmas

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic table; fishing license required for anglers

GETTING THERE:

From Show Low, travel 5 miles east on U.S. 60 to Bourdon Ranch Road near milepost 347. Turn left (north), go 5 miles to Hatchery Road, turn right and drive 0.3 mile on the good gravel road to the parking area at the hatchery complex.

Prairie Coneflower "Mexican Hat"
Blooms: June-October

SOUTH FORK TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

The South Fork Trail 97 near Eagar, with its proximity to water and varied habitats, is a wildlife magnet. The challenging route can be done as an out-and-back or car shuttle hike.

Most people begin at the South Fork day use area. Shaded by tall pines, firs and spruce trees, the first mile of the trail escaped the wrath of the 2011 Wallow Fire that burned more than a half million acres of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest. This Eden-like stretch follows the South Fork of the Little Colorado River. The waterway is cluttered with willows, alders, red-osier dogwood, skunk bush, poison ivy (tip: leaves of three, let it be) and wild roses. Where the water comes closest to the trail, be on the lookout for elk, stealthy great blue herons and ingeniously constructed beaver dams. As the trail moves southeast, gradually gaining elevation, it creeps up on the scar of the fire. A charred tree trunk here and a pile of burnt logs there precede the kick-in-the-gut moment: Just over a mile in, Eden meets Hell.

Oddly prefaced by a gateway of willows, the next 5 miles of flame-plundered terrain are physically taxing and difficult to process emotionally. Those who remember what the trail looked like before the fire will find this segment heartbreaking. Running through the middle of the canyon-bound wasteland, a slender trickle of water clunks and chugs beneath a resurgent fringe of aspen saplings and spotty stands of survivor pines. From this point on, you'll need to hop over deadfall and stay alert for other hazards. Three miles in, the trail crosses the river and begins a 1,500-foot ascent to the top of a bench, where views of the surrounding Springerville volcanic field roll out to the New Mexico border.

The high mounds of Greens Peak and Mount Baldy tower over dozens of eroded cinder cones and acres of golden grasslands. The route then winds down toward Mexican Hay Lake, which is rarely more than a weedy bog. The open space surrounding the lake is a prime habitat for pronghorn. Among the fastest land mammals, these elegant horned beasts run as fast as 60 miles per hour. It's worth sitting quietly at the edge of the lake to catch a glimpse of them sprinting over open prairies, clouds of rattled birds in their wake.

The trail ends at the northwest edge of the lake. A rough mile-long dirt road continues to State Route 261 and the Point of the Mountain Vista rest area. If you parked a shuttle vehicle there, just keep walking. Otherwise, return the way you came.

Bighorn Sheep

LENGTH: 14 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,540-9,060 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restrooms at Point of the Mountain

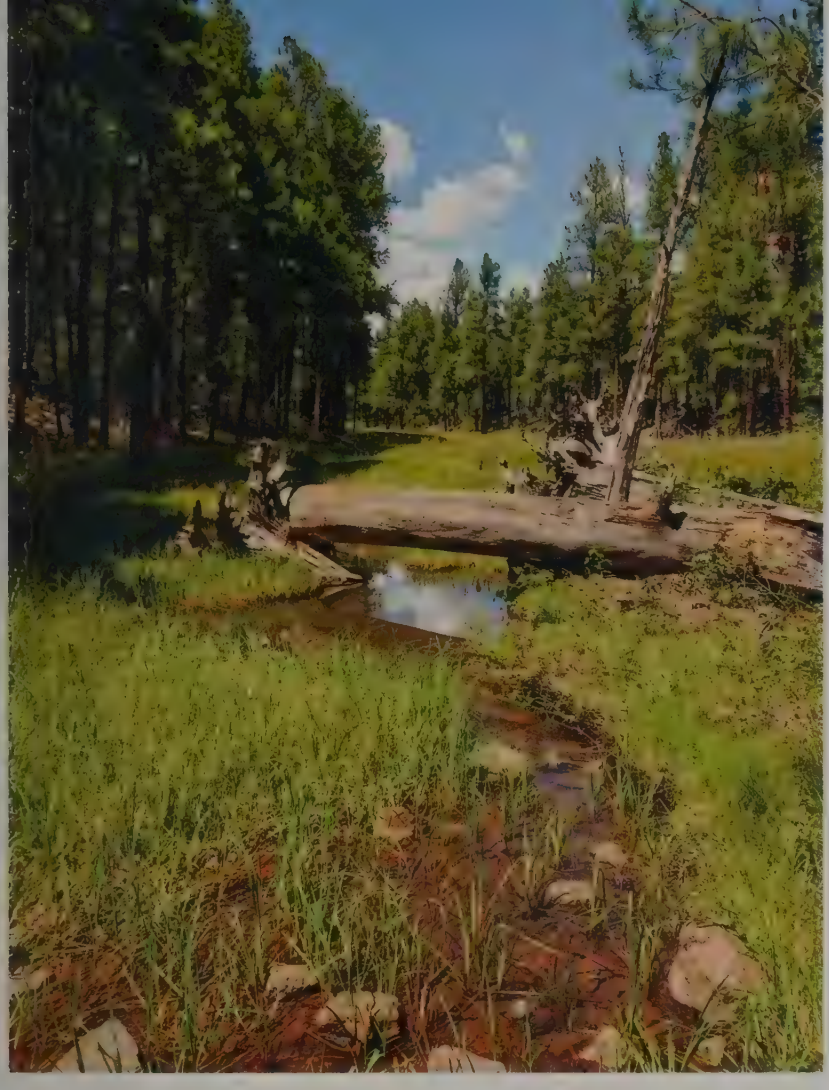
GETTING THERE:

South Fork Trailhead:

From the Hon-Dah Casino in Pinetop-Lakeside, go 32.8 miles east on State Route 260 to County Road 4124, located near milepost 390 on the right. Go 2.6 miles south on CR 4124, cross a bridge and turn right into the trailhead parking area. Roads are paved and sedan-friendly gravel.

Point of the Mountain:

From the CR 4124 turnoff, continue 2.3 miles east on SR 260 to SR 261, past mile post 393. Turn right and go 7.1 miles to the vista point on the left, just past milepost 405. Hike 200 feet back up SR 261 and follow Forest Road 70B/8070B (unmarked at this writing) around the lake to the trail. Note: SR 261 is paved, but the forest roads are rough, unmaintained dirt. You could drive the mile to the trail, but a four-wheel-drive vehicle is recommended.



SPRINGS TRAIL

White Mountains Trail System

Have you ever wondered about how forest trails came to be? Their origins range from repurposed game trails and Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps projects to collaborative efforts between grassroots teams and land management organizations.

The White Mountains Trail System represents the work of TRACKS, a group of volunteers dedicated to the development and preservation of non-motorized trails within the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest and surrounding communities. Their ongoing work harnesses partnerships between government, business, private organizations and volunteers to raise funds and provide labor to build and maintain a more than 200-mile system of linking trails, with an epicenter around Show Low and Pinetop-Lakeside.

LENGTH: 3.6 miles

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 7,120-7,210 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

In Pinetop-Lakeside, go south on State Route 260 (White Mountain Boulevard) to Buckspring Road. Turn left, go 0.6 mile to Sky Hi Road, turn left again and continue 1.1 miles to the trailhead on the left.

A good introduction to this system is the Springs Trail. The easy-to-find, 3.6-mile loop located just off State Route 260 in Pinetop-Lakeside showcases the project's many fine qualities. The trailhead has plenty of parking and a map kiosk that shows the route and its connector trails. There's excellent signage throughout, so even novice hikers won't get lost. Diamond-shaped tree tags indicate the way, and numbered location markers that correspond with downloadable maps are placed every quarter mile so you'll always know where you are. This is handy in case you need to call for help.

The forested trail winds though bucolic pastures with grazing cattle. Billy and Thompson creeks, stock tanks and springs add watery points of interest. At the western edge of the loop, Pinetop Springs occupies a meadow dotted with concrete troughs that attract a mix of domestic livestock and forest critters. Water levels in the creeks vary with seasons and rainfall, but there's almost always a few reflecting pools.

An especially productive spot to observe wildlife is where the trail follows the cliffs above Thompson Creek. Here, pine-shaded volcanic boulders overlooking the yawning water course provide convenient places to sit and scope out the elk, deer and ravens that congregate among muddy pools and fringy shrubs.

Hops
Blooms: July-August

LENGTH: 6.5 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 8,540-8,830 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Eagar, go right (west) on State Route 260 for 2.8 miles to SR 261. Turn left (south) on SR 261 and continue for just over 16 miles to State Route 273. Turn right (north), go 2.1 miles to the turn off for Forest Road 116, turn left (south) and continue 3.5 miles to the signed trailhead on the right. The trail begins at a gate located a short distance down FR 116 on the left.

THOMPSON TRAIL

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest

A babbling mountain stream in a pristine alpine meadow makes a welcoming gateway to the Thompson Trail. Although this trail was damaged by the 2011 Wallow Fire, it maintains most of its scenic appeal.

Never straying far from the water's edge, the trail parallels the upper reaches of the West Fork of the Black River. The shallow tributary twists and turns through a canyon where soaring basalt walls and massive, rough-hewn boulder fields add dramatic flair to the otherwise tranquil landscape. From the trailhead, the path dips into the river gorge. Lacy curtains of olive moss sway from the conifer canopy above the first of several dams and rock barriers put in place along the stream as part of the Apache trout recovery program. Found only in the streams and lakes of the White Mountains, Arizona's state fish nearly became extinct due to the damaging effects of invasive species and loss of habitat. Thankfully, the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969 initiated a series of cooperative efforts to preserve the rare, speckled fish. The recovery program has been so successful that the Apache trout is now on track to become one of the first indigenous fishes in the United States to be taken off the endangered list.

Beyond the dam, the trail heads through a boggy field alive with waist-high grasses, wildflowers and shrubs. Marked only by hard-to-find stepping-stones, this segment of the trail is a challenge to follow. The spectacular scenery in this corridor acts as a convenient distraction, so you'll hardly notice the route-finding struggle and the fact that you're sloshing through ankle-deep muck.

After that, the trail dries out as its crawls through thickets of hops, raspberries and a spectacular array of mushrooms. Near the end of the trail, at the junction with the West Fork Trail, the roar of swirling rapids marks the turnaround point for the hike.

WENIMA WILDLIFE AREA

Springerville

Within the deeply incised Little Colorado River canyon, Wenima Wildlife Area protects the biodiversity of a scenic 2.5-mile strip of property encompassing three types of ecosystems. Managed by Arizona Game & Fish to provide an essential habitat for native wildlife, the 357-acre site includes a riparian stream corridor, upland pinion-juniper grasslands and open pastures.

Two easy trails paralleling the stream are outfitted with interpretive signs and convenient rest areas with benches. Beavertail Trail heads north through a lush jungle of willow arbors, house-high grasses, groves of walnut trees and hop-vine-laced brambles before culminating at an old cabin beneath soaring basalt bluffs. Powerhouse Trail winds south, exploring a more arid upland habitat of rugged cliffs, creekside grape vines and beaver-built pools where the threatened Little Colorado spinedace fish dart like silver bullets. The ruins of an abandoned native stone shed, pipes and dam equipment mark the end of the route.

The property's surrounding meadows and forests are open to hunting, fishing and off-trail hiking, making for an eclectic mix of public recreational opportunities.

LENGTH:

Beavertail Trail: 2.5 miles one way

Powerhouse Trail: 1.2 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,700-6,800 feet

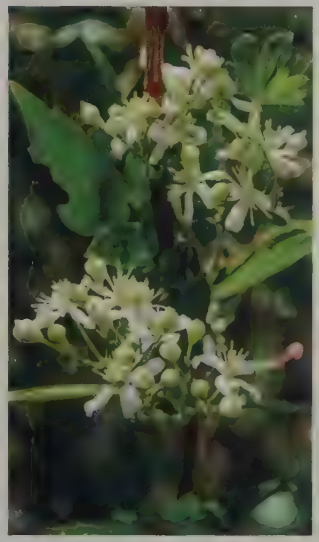
BEST SEASON: May-October

HOURS: sunrise to sunset daily

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Springerville, travel 2 miles northwest on U.S. 60 to the U.S. 180/191 junction. From here, continue 0.25 mile north on U.S. 180/191, turn right onto Hooper Ranch Road and continue 1.5 miles to the parking area. The trails are located 0.2 mile farther up the road from the trailhead. Beavertail Trail is on the left before the bridge, and Powerhouse Trail is on the right past the bridge. Access road is sedan-friendly gravel.



White Virgin's Bower
Blooms: May-September

Deer's Ears
Blooms: May-August

WEST BALDY TRAIL

Mount Baldy Wilderness Area

Arizona's second highest mountain is an ancient stratovolcano that last erupted around 2 million years ago. The genesis of Mount Baldy began roughly 9 million years ago with multiple lava flows that gradually built up the mountain to an estimated 13,000 feet. Although this massif's initial geological history mirrors that of the Ring of Fire volcanoes like those found in the Pacific and along the west coast of the Americas, its present form is due mostly to the work of glacial ice.

If you want proof that enormous ice sheets once slid through Arizona, just take a hike on West Baldy Trail 94. The scoured mounds, scoop-shaped valleys and fields of errant boulders are actually cirques and moraines that formed during three periods of glaciation lasting hundreds of thousands of years. Today, these ice-born features form the headwater basins of the West and East Forks of the Little Colorado River that continue to shape the mountain's character and feed water all the way to the Salt River outside of Phoenix. Unlike the chiseled peaks of Flagstaff, the chain of bulbous, volcanic mounds that make up Mount Baldy present a tamer alpine experience.

Two trails ascend to near the top. West Baldy Trail 94 follows the West Fork of the Little Colorado River and is the route of choice for those looking for a green, water-themed trek. East Baldy 95 is somewhat less shaded and more exposed. In between, the 3.5-mile Mount Baldy Crossover Trail provides a handy link to make a 17.5-mile loop hike.

West Baldy Trail 94 starts as an easy streamside walk. Alpine meadows, thigh-high wildflowers surrounding the river and magnificent views define the hike's first 3 miles. Instead of being smacked with an abrupt vertical ascent, the arduous climbing sort of sneaks up on you, turning serious near the 4-mile point, where the trail enters a tract damaged by the 2011 Wallow Fire. Charred tree trunks teeter like dominoes poised to topple downhill at the behest of summer storms and winter snow. The relatively short haul through the destruction is mitigated by the promise of impending high-point vistas and a sense of accomplishment.

The "summit" is actually ridgeline with three distinct peaks. The tempting middle one – 11,403-foot Baldy Peak – is within the White Mountain Apache Tribe boundary and is open only to tribal members. Please respect this sacred area by not trespassing.

LENGTH: 14 miles round trip (up and back)

RATING: moderate-difficult

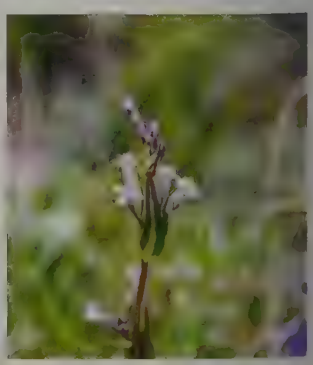
ELEVATION: 9,000-11,200 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: moderate

GETTING THERE:

From Pinetop-Lakeside, travel 20 miles east on State Route 260 to State Route 273 (signed for Sunrise Ski Area, just past milepost 377). Turn left and go 8.4 miles south to the West Baldy trailhead on the right at milepost 386. The East Baldy trailhead is 2.5 miles farther south on SR 273.



Autumn Dwarf Gentian
Blooms: August-October

WOODLAND LAKE PARK

Pinetop-Lakeside

LENGTH: 6 miles, five connected trails

RATING: easy – the 1-mile Lake Loop is paved and barrier-free

ELEVATION: 6,950 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic ramadas, playground

GETTING THERE:

From State Route 260 in east Pinetop, turn right (south) on Woodland Lake Road – located past Blue Ridge School at milepost 353. Go 0.25 mile on Woodland Lake Road to the park entrance. Drive to the end of the road for barrier-free access, or park at any of the lots for unpaved access to the Lake Loop trail.

On balmy summer afternoons, ospreys turn aerial acrobatics on the wind currents above Woodland Lake. Oak-shaded benches at the edge of the marshy end of the lake provide handy spots to view the graceful predators.

In addition to rich waterfowl and raptor viewing opportunities, five easy trails roam within and around the 100-acre park complex, which includes tennis courts, softball fields, covered picnic ramadas, grills and playgrounds. Even with all the adjacent family-friendly amenities, the hiking trails are pleasantly quiet and very scenic.

Lake Loop is paved and suitable for strollers, wheelchairs and walkers. It's a good place to begin, as it's the hub for various routes. As its name implies, it circles the water, passing a boat ramp, a fishing dock and a cattail-cluttered wetland. Summer wildflowers that flourish on the moist banks provide convenient cover for flocks of yellow-headed blackbirds and a stew of waterfowl.

Alfalfa
Blooms: April-October

Connecting trails cut through sunny meadows and pine-oak forests. It's possible to hike from the lake to Big Springs Environmental Area – just follow the Hitching Post Loop for 1.5 miles to the signed turnoff.

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SOUTHERN ARIZONA

Ash Creek Trail, Pinaleño Mountains

Tucson

Mount Lemmon

Saguaro National Park

Coronado National Forest

Mountain Climbs

Nature Preserves

Wetlands

Waterfalls

Desert Zinnia
Blooms: March-October

ARIZONA TRAIL PASSAGE 8: RINCON VALLEY

Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead to Colossal Cave Mountain Park, Vail

LENGTH: 4.7 miles one way to Colossal Cave

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 3,098-3,650 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

Gabe Zimmerman Trailhead:

From Phoenix, go south on Interstate 10 and take exit 281 in Tucson. Go 3 miles southeast, then north on the frontage road (Marsh Station Road) to the trailhead on the right.

Also known as the "three bridges" section, Passage 8 of the state-traversing Arizona Trail winds through a swath of desert south of Tucson. Although it's one of the shortest and easiest of the 43 passages that comprise the 817-mile trail, this 14.8-mile trek is special because it's home to the first stands of saguaro cacti encountered when hiking the trail from south to north.

The hike begins at the Gabe Zimmerman trailhead with a contemplative stroll around memorials to the victims of the January 2011 Tucson shooting that wounded former Arizona Congresswoman Gabby Giffords. From here, the route descends into Davidson Canyon and the fringes of Cienega Creek Natural Preserve, where perennial waters and shady cottonwoods make for a popular camping and water stocking spot. (Note: If you want to leave the trail and explore around the creek, permits are required.)

Beyond the creek, the trail roams under and around three railroad trestle bridges, then heads north into Colossal Cave Mountain Park. The privately operated site offers camping, water and tours of subterranean limestone caverns, and is a good turnaround point for a day hike.

The passage continues on to Hope Camp at the border of Saguaro National Park, where you can continue north to Utah or hike 3 miles west to the car shuttle location at the Loma Alta trailhead.

ASPEN-MARSHALL GULCH LOOP

Pusch Ridge Wilderness Area, Tucson

Half blaze-ravaged moonscape, half creekside woodland, this famously crowded loop hike makes for an interesting firsthand look at the cycle of wildfire forest destruction and subsequent regeneration.

Willowy, white-barked aspens – the quintessential trees of mountain climes – depend on fire for their survival. This species needs lots of sunlight to grow and reproduce, and their natural lifecycle includes succumbing to the shade and crowding brought on by encroaching conifers. When wildfires clear the trees and open the forest floor to sunlight, aspens shoot up rapidly, and right now, they're having a heyday on the slopes of Mount Lemmon.

A hike on the Aspen-Marshall Gulch loop showcases this miracle of nature in progress. The tour begins on Aspen Trail 93, progressing uphill through a patchwork of burned areas and coniferous woodlands. Soon, the path enters a dell of slender aspen sprouts with pale white trunks and vivid green leaves that rustle and sway in a graveyard of charred pine stumps. Beyond this point, the route ducks in and out of scorched tracts and intact woodlands before emerging on a sooty, snag-cluttered saddle. Here, the dramatic effects of blazes draw visceral reactions. The trail gets a bit sketchy in this area, so watch for cairns leading up to the junction with Marshall Gulch Trail 3.

The route leaves the ashen badlands, passing through a labyrinth of stone, before heading downhill and into another world, with creekside maples, ferns and alders rounding out the dichotomous flavor of this hike.

LENGTH: 5.1-mile loop

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 7,410-8,400 feet

FACILITIES: restrooms

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the Grant Road exit 256 and go 8.7 miles east to Tanque Verde Road. Turn left, go 3.4 miles to Catalina Highway, go left and drive uphill 27 miles to the Marshall Gulch picnic area. Roads are 100 percent paved.

Quaking Aspen
Blooms: Early Spring

BROWN MOUNTAIN

Tucson Mountain Park

When compared to the soaring peaks and jagged ridges that surround it, Brown Mountain reads more like a molehill. But don't be too quick to shrug off hiking the hill that anchors the west end of Tucson Mountain Park in Pinal County. Its wallflower appearance belies a memorable hike replete with rich Sonoran Desert vegetation and far-reaching vistas.

Although a hike on the moderate-rated Brown Mountain Trail is a less intimidating trek than, say, adjacent King Canyon Trail to Wasson Peak, the little adventure still packs a respectable punch with some edgy exposure and steep slopes.

Accessible by way of several picnic areas within the park, the hike begins with an initial descent and wash crossing before taking on the switchbacks that climb to the mountain's crest. Except for a few places where the trail clings to cliffs with vertical drop-offs and some areas of loose rock, the climb requires only moderate effort. Twisting skyward among impressive stands of saguaros, cholla, mesquite and blooming shrubs entwined with wild vines, the trail dodges stony crags stained the colors of wine and rust. It doesn't take long for the ascent sweat to start paying dividends. As the trail loops up and over the mountain, it delivers a carousel-like experience of ever-changing scenery.

Atop the mountain's hogback ridgeline, an unobscured panorama of sprawling valleys and layers of mountain ranges takes center stage. To the north and east, the Tucson Mountains form a ragged wall of imposing pinnacles. To the south and west, the expansive flatlands of Tohono O'Odham land and the Aguirre Valley melt into the hazy silhouettes of Kitt Peak, the Santa Rosa Mountains, Mount Wrightson and the singular form of Baboquivari Peak.

Directly north, the muted green scrub and grasslands of Saguaro National Park serve as reminders that this is one of most dense and diverse desert plant and wildlife environments in Arizona. The return leg of the hike traces the mountain's lower north flank, capping off a short but rewarding outing. Because this hike won't take very long to complete, plan on extending your visit by exploring nearby Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, Old Tucson Studios or the many attractions at Saguaro National Park.

LENGTH: 3.7-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,650-3,100 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms nearby

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the Speedway Boulevard exit 257, head west and continue 9.4 miles on Speedway (turns into Gates Pass Road at 4.6 miles) to Kinney Road. Turn right on Kinney and continue to either of the two main access points along the road. It's 0.8 mile to the Brown Mountain picnic area, or 2.2 miles to the Juan Santa Cruz picnic area. At the Brown Mountain site, the trail begins at the picnic area near the C.B. Brown sign. At the Juan Santa Cruz site, the trail begins just past the fenced-off ramada near a grill and picnic table.

DAVID YETMAN TRAIL

Tucson Mountain Park

How exactly do people get a trail named for them? There's no single formula, but it certainly helps if you've made considerable contributions in the fields of conservation, outdoor recreational planning or the sweat and grind of construction and fundraising for Arizona trails. Or maybe you become a celebrity scientist who stokes curiosity in desert biomes.

David Yetman, Ph.D., is that kind of guy. As a scientist, author, photographer and host of *The Desert Speaks* series on PBS, he's been educating the masses for decades. His eponymous trail is a roundup of all things desert-y, offering a rich trip among Sonoran desert plants, animals and homesteading history wrapped up in the ragged peaks and jumbled washes of the Tucson Mountains.

One of the most popular attractions along the trail is the Bowen Homestead, also known as the "stone house." The still-standing walls and foundations of the 1930s-era ranch house can be found 1.1 miles from the Camino de Oeste trailhead. Built of native stone that mingles quietly with its surroundings, the structure appears more grown than built.

Large picture windows that lost their glass years ago frame sharp-edged escarpments and softly rounded, saguaro-dusted slopes, while the footprints of living areas hint at a life far removed from 21st-century excess. An interpretive sign at the site describes the homestead floorplan and gives some background about the Bowen family and their impact on the surrounding territory.

The 5.9-mile one-way hike is the longest route within Tucson Mountain Park's 62-mile trail system. Because it's anchored by two trailheads and linked to several other trails, it's easy to customize a long out-and-back trek or shorter loop trips.

LENGTH: 5.9 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 2,600-3,000 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms nearby

GETTING THERE:

Camino de Oeste Trailhead:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the Speedway Boulevard exit 257. Go 4.5 miles west on Speedway, veer left at the Speedway/Gates Pass Road fork, then make an immediate left onto Camino de Oeste. Continue 0.6 mile along a narrow, dirt road that's passable by sedan. Roads are paved.

David Yetman West Trailhead:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the Speedway exit 257. Follow Speedway/Gates Pass Road roughly 9 miles (mind the narrow, mountain curves) to the trailhead/lookout on the left.

DOUGLAS SPRING to BRIDAL WREATH FALLS

Saguaro National Park, Rincon Mountain District

Sometimes, timing is everything. This is particularly true in the desert, where spectacular waterfalls appear like raging liquid phantoms after periods of rain, only to dissolve into trickles and muddy, gnat-addled drop pools within days. One of the most accessible transient water shows happens in Saguaro National Park East.

Almost anybody with a pair of decent hiking shoes, a few liters of drinking water and a spare afternoon can marvel at the wonder of an ephemeral desert water chute by way of the Douglas Spring Trail to Bridal Wreath Falls. Because it's so easy to access, the trailhead is a busy place, especially on weekends. A shaded kiosk marks the trail gateway into a sunny land of cactus and scrub backed with views of Tucson's Rincon and Santa Catalina Mountains, which tower to over 8,000 feet.

The route is tantamount to a 2.5-mile staircase. It's a constant and sometimes steep climb through a landscape that morphs from classic desert into a massive grassland with the feel of an African savannah. Although there are no gazelles or giraffes roaming these plains, it's prime habitat for mountain lions. Javelina, rabbits and deer share the wilds with gila monsters, raptors and desert tortoises.

The turnoff for the short hike to the falls shows up at the 2.3-mile point. Surrounded by miles of shadeless, mesquite-dotted prairie, the only clue that a waterfall is nearby is the park service sign pointing the way. A mild descent leads to a grotto of polished stone, where a mild boulder scramble is required to get to the 50-foot cascade plunging over bare rock like a wind-blown ribbon. The falls vacillate from barely dripping like a faucet to raging like a white water river after heavy rains and during high snowmelt season.

LENGTH: 5.2 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,745-3,827 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take exit 257 at Speedway Boulevard, go left and continue 17.5 miles to where Speedway dead-ends at the Douglas Spring Trailhead. Roads are paved all the way.

Desert Rock Pea
Blooms: February-May

FINGER ROCK CANYON

Pusch Ridge Wilderness Area

LENGTH: 6.3 miles one way (Trail 42 only)

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 3,120-6,880 feet (trail 42 proper)

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the Ina Road exit 248. Follow Ina to where it curves into Skyline Drive. Continue to the 9.6-mile point, turn left on Alvernon Road and go 0.9 mile to the trailhead parking lot on the left. The trail begins a few yards up the road on Alvernon.

Turnaround options:

Finger Rock Spring: 1 mile, 3,520 feet (400 feet elevation gain)

Wind Cave: 2 miles, 4,500 feet (1,380 feet elevation gain)

Linda Vista Saddle: 3.5 miles, 5,700 feet (2,580 feet elevation gain)

Mount Kimball: 4.2 miles, 7,258 feet (4,138 feet elevation gain)

Commanding the skyline above Finger Rock Canyon is an eponymous stone pinnacle that resembles a clenched fist with its index finger pointing toward the heavens. This is your first clue to the nature of the trail that makes an aggressive, unrelenting ascent of its rugged domain.

Finger Rock Trail 42 begins with a moderate walk among massive rock slabs, sheer cliff faces, saguaros and seasonal creeks with mini waterfalls and lush greenery. Don't get too comfortable – the party's over at the 1-mile point, where just beyond Finger Rock Spring, the trail begins its assault on your physical and mental fortitude.

The route wastes no time gaining elevation. Like a giant staircase, the trail moves uphill via tight switchbacks and high-step maneuvers, with few breaks in between. Much of the path clings to the edge of the canyon walls, offering both terrific views and queasy exposure. In some spots, you're hiking just inches from sheer drop-offs. The canyon's sharp-edged geology, hardy Upper Sonoran Zone vegetation and unspoiled ambiance are a tribute to its protected status within Pusch Ridge Wilderness.

Although the suburbs and industrial parks of Tucson are visible from the trail, the canyon emanates a strong, untamed character. Embrace the wild by inhaling the brisk mountain breezes, listening for tumbling water and the cries of raptors while keeping an eye out for bighorn sheep creeping along clefts and ridgelines. To protect the sheep, dogs are not allowed on the trails within the wildlife management area.

Conquering this delightfully agonizing trail is a feather in the cap for experts, but trekkers of all skill levels can enjoy the hike by adapting the length. The super high-octane version of this trek includes a side trip up to 7,258-foot Mount Kimball. To reach the summit, veer left at the junction with Pima Canyon Trail 62 at 3.9 miles and hike a half mile on 62 to the summit spur.

LENGTH: 6.8 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,760-3,720 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: visit the park website for current fees and accepted passes

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the Speedway Boulevard exit 257 and go 17 miles east to the Douglas Spring trailhead on the right. Roads are 100 percent paved.

GARWOOD – THREE TANKS LOOP

Saguaro National Park, Rincon Mountain District

There's more to Saguaro National Park than the eponymous cacti. This is especially true in the park's east side, where relics of human history blend with an array of plant and animal specimens wedged between the craggy peaks of the Rincon Mountains and see-forever valley vistas of suburban Tucson.

The area's keynote curiosities date to a cattle grazing era that ceased in the 1970s. Remnants of ranch operations can still be seen along the two dozen trails that weave through foothills, washes and open desert. The interconnected trail system is set up with multiple access points and signed junctions with mileages. Hikers can use a downloadable map from the park's website to easily create treks that range from short and easy to long and difficult.

One recommended loop option that uses four trails is packed with points of interest and a sweaty climb into the high foothills. To try this ambitious loop, begin by hiking 0.2 mile on the Douglas Spring Trail, then turn right onto the Garwood Trail. This 1.4-mile segment makes a gradual ascent through a sunny cactus forest. Acres of pink and magenta fairy duster shrubs tickle centuries-old saguaros and jockey for sunlight among swaying ocotillos. Year-round blooming plants like the fuzzy-flowered indigo bush and delicate desert rose mallow add splashes of color to the desert's muted palette.

The park's website offers a brief education about saguaros, including how "nurse plants" aid in their growth. You'll see examples of this symbiotic relationship along the trails, where twisted palo verde and ironwood trees retain futile embraces around saguaros that have outgrown the need for a "mom's" protection. Near Bajada Wash, keep an eye open for a majestic crested saguaro.

This segment ends near Garwood Dam, a concrete structure built to provide a water source for the nearby abandoned homestead. Turn left at the dam and follow the Carrillo Trail to the steel tank at Rock Spring. Here, you'll pick up the Three Tank Trail to continue the skyward slog that passes by Mica and Aguila tanks on the way up to the Douglas Spring Trail. The tanks attract wildlife, so if you travel quietly and early in the day, you might spot deer, bobcats, fox and maybe a mountain lion. After taking in the high-desert views, turn left and descend through grasslands and slickrock back to the trailhead.

HOPE CAMP

Saguaro National Park, Rincon Mountain District

The Hope Camp historic site sits near the base of the Rincon Mountains, wrapped in high-desert grasslands, flood plains and thorny vegetation. What remains of the long-abandoned cattle-herding camp is a barbed-wire-addled spread of dusty concrete troughs, corroded water tanks and a windmill that's seen better days.

This quiet pocket of relics and the trail that leads to it is now part of the Saguaro National Park Rincon District outside of Tucson. The dilapidated watering hole is the end cap of a remarkable trek and one of many points of interest hikers will encounter on the Hope Camp Trail.

From the Loma Alta trailhead that sits at the edge of Tucson's eastern suburbs, the route reveals its treasures at a leisurely yet constant pace, beginning with a stroll on a wide, dirt two-track popular with equestrians and mountain bikers. The initial scene is one of sparse vegetation and little shade, but as the trail begins its descent into Rincon Valley, the landscape explodes with greenery.

At the 1-mile point, Deer Camp appears in a depression off to the left. A collection of rusty metal contraptions and crumbling troughs afflicted with the kind of decay that intrigues, rather than offends, sits below a creaky windmill. With half its blades missing and the others dangling like loose teeth, the spider-like tower is a ghostly heirloom of a bygone era. The trail then enters a mesquite-shaded stretch of washes and intermittent creeks before heading uphill to the hike's biggest "Ooh! Aah!" moment. A short climb reveals a sprawling valley backed by the pine- and juniper-capped Rincon Mountains, which rise to over 8,000 feet.

Clambering down from this high-point vista, you'll pass stands of enormous saguaros, cholla and ocotillo before connecting with the Arizona Trail Passage 9 for the final half-mile walk to Hope Camp. An arch of wooden benches beneath a patch of mesquite trees makes for a good place to take a break and explore the scrappy artifacts that groan and clink in mountain-borne breezes. The toppled blade of the windmill rests bent and broken at its base.

Look up and you'll notice a famous name on the tail vane: F. Ronstadt. Federico Jose Maria Ronstadt arrived in Tucson from Mexico as a teenager in 1882 and became a major contributor to the town's pre-statehood commerce and culture. His ventures in blacksmithing, wagon making, hardware and pharmacy are legendary. If Tucson were to elect a "first family," the Ronstadts would be strong contenders. In addition to his business and civic acumen, Ronstadt's love of music led to the establishment of one of Tucson's first orchestras, Club Filarmónico Tucsonense. Best known among the musical family members is Federico's granddaughter, singer Linda Ronstadt. Imbued with pioneer spirit, the Ronstadt family legacy is a permanent part of Arizona history. Hope Camp – not so much. Who knows how long it will be before desert sand, encroaching shrubs and consumption obscure the site from memory?

Beneath the windmill, tucked among rusty-nail planks and unidentifiable tangled bits, a giant saguaro skeleton trapped in the clutch of tree branches stands frozen, arms to the sky as if locked in a contest with its mechanical neighbor to see which can stay standing the longest.

LENGTH: 5.6 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 3,120-3,360 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms at the park

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the Speedway Boulevard exit 257 and go 14.2 miles east to North Freeman Road. Turn right (south) on Freeman and continue 3.5 miles to a stop sign. Veer left onto Old Spanish Trail and follow the signs to the Saguaro National Park Rincon Visitor Center to purchase your $15 pass, which is good for seven days. (There are several pass options; visit the park website for details.) Circle back and continue 7 miles south on Old Spanish Trail to South Camino Loma Alta. Turn left (north) and go 2.5 miles to the trailhead. The last half mile is on rough dirt passable by carefully driven passenger cars.

JOE'S CANYON-YAQUI RIDGE

Coronado National Forest, Sierra Vista

Sierra Vista
ARIZONA

In order to trek the entire 817-mile Arizona Trail from the Mexico border to Utah, you have to start by hiking backwards. That's because the trail's southern terminus is only accessible on foot, horseback or bike. The nearest drive-up trailhead is a mile uphill at Montezuma Pass near Sierra Vista. So, everybody who hikes the Arizona Trail does the first mile twice.

Although there are many hikers who plow straight through the trail on months-long marathon journeys, most approach the route in fits and spurts, knocking off passages with day hikes and weekend backpack adventures. For the casual visitor, the trail can also be sampled with short trips and loop hikes that spin off connecting routes. One interesting and scenic option to explore the Huachuca Mountains passage begins at the Coronado National Monument Visitor Center.

Pick up the Joe's Canyon Trail, which climbs 1,400 feet up a sheer-walled gorge that tops out on the airy grasslands of Smuggler's Ridge. You'll head right and walk along the knife-edge saddle with sweeping views overlooking the Mexican State of Sonora.

At the Yaqui Ridge Trail junction, the route descends 600 feet through acres of ocotillo and cholla to the international boundary post 102. It marks the beginning (or end) of Arizona's most epic journey.

LENGTH: 6.8 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,006-6,493 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Tucson, travel south on Interstate 10 to State Route 90 exit 302. Go 25 miles south to Sierra Vista. Connect with State Route 92 and continue 16 miles to South Coronado Memorial Drive. Follow it 4.7 miles (it becomes East Montezuma Canyon Road) to the Coronado National Memorial Visitor Center (open 8 a.m.-4 p.m., closed Thanksgiving and Christmas). Trail begins beyond the center. Parking is free.

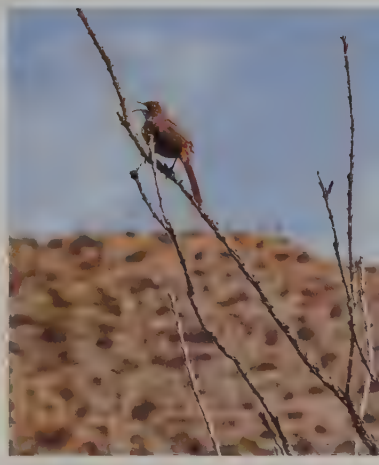
KING CANYON TRAIL to WASSON PEAK

Saguaro National Park, Tucson Mountain District

If you hike along the trails of Saguaro National Park West in any depth, sooner or later, you'll end up on the 4,687-foot summit of Wasson Peak. Two clusters of trails at the southwest and northeast ends of the park tie in with arterial routes that funnel to the highest point of the Tucson Mountain Range. King Canyon Trail is the shortest, most direct route to the top.

Though brief, the trek is no walk in the park (OK, technically, it *is* in a park). Over its 3.5-mile one-way course, hikers ascend 1,987 feet along a dirt path that goes aggressively vertical on the last mile. Immediately, a cloud-caressing massif looms ahead. This is the infamous "false summit" of Wasson Peak. The actual high point is behind it, and you won't see it until you've hiked halfway up its deceptive sibling. Advance knowledge prevents the emotional torture of discovering this cruel fluke with exhausted legs. From the parking area just outside the Saguaro National Park boundary, follow the dirt road at the end of the lot and hike a few dozen yards to the official trailhead.

King Canyon Trail proper ends 0.3 mile from the summit prize. The drool-worthy destination appears as a lone stub at the end of a spur trail hugging a knife-edge ridge hovering over Tucson. At this point, with just one more uphill haul left to tackle, the physical climbing challenge is mostly complete. Renew your resolve, take a deep breath and trudge on, because mentally, you're already there.



Curve-Billed Thrasher

LENGTH: 7 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,700-4,687 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

RULES: Dogs, bikes and motorized vehicles are prohibited. Livestock is not allowed on the summit switchbacks.

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take Speedway Boulevard exit 257 and head 12 miles west (Speedway turns into Gates Pass Road) to Kinney Road. Turn right and continue 2.5 miles to the trailhead located 0.1 mile past the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum at parking area K24 on the right.

MOUNT BIGELOW

Santa Catalina Mountains, Tucson

In terms of mountain summit hikes, this trek to a peak on the eastern edge of the Santa Catalina range ranks among the easiest. The ascent is gradual, winding uphill through fragrant pine and oak thickets. At first, views are spare, but as the trail moves into its higher elevations, glimpses of the surrounding desert break through the timbers.

On the summit, a hardware jungle of communication towers and a fire lookout are anchored to the rock. Beyond the breezy peak and groaning metal, the grass-fringed summit ridge falls away to reveal the hazy grid of Tucson, with muted silhouettes of wilderness peaks – including those of Mount Wrightson Wilderness – dotting an expansive landscape.

LENGTH: 2 miles round trip

ELEVATION: 7,910-8,550 feet

RATING: easy

FACILITIES: restrooms, water

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take Grant Road (exit 256) and go 8.7 miles east to Tanque Verde Road. Turn left and continue 3.4 miles to Catalina Highway. Go left and drive uphill 19.5 miles to the Lower Bigelow trailhead on the right. All roads are paved.

Lookout Tower

White-Tailed Deer

ORACLE STATE PARK TRAILS

Because Oracle State Park is open only on weekends, there's a narrow window of opportunity for hiking the site's 15 miles of trails during the cooler months.

Located in a prime wildlife corridor of high-desert scrub and savanna grasslands, the park is bolstered by the far northern reaches of Tucson's Santa Catalina Mountains and the sprawling rampart of the Galiuro Mountains looming over the maundering gorge of the San Pedro River to the west. Although there's little shade on the eight routes that amble among soaptree yucca, agaves, scrub oak and fruit-bearing cholla, the upside is that the sun-drenched foothills display boundless, unobstructed vistas.

The best time to hike here is November through April, when crisp mountain breezes whipping through hip-high forbs add hair-rustling fun. Despite being in a park setting with amenities, the trails have a nice wilderness feel to them. Sightings of white-tailed deer, fox, javelina, birds and reptiles are common.

Passage 13 of the Arizona National Scenic Trail, which skirts the park's edge, connects with several of the routes. Excellent signage and soft footing make for easy, pain-free travel on most of the trails. The one exception is the Windmill Loop, which begins at the bottom of Kannally Wash with a trudge through calf-cramping sand with few directional signs.

Post-hike, visit the park's Kannally Ranch House. The 1930s adobe structure, with its multiple levels, twisting staircases, art-embellished spaces and kitchen with a wall of original iceboxes adds a note of history to top off your day.

LENGTH: 15 miles, plus 4 miles of Arizona Trail

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 3,700-4,600 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

FEE: $7 daily fee per vehicle

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic areas, museum, gift shop

GETTING THERE:

3820 Wildlife Drive, Oracle:

From Phoenix, take State Route 79 south. At the junction with SR 77, turn left (east).and continue to the Oracle turnoff. Follow the road through Oracle (America Avenue) 2.3 miles to Mt. Lemmon Road. Turn right on Mt. Lemmon and go 1.1 miles to the park entrance on the left (north) side of Mt. Lemmon Road.

SAN PEDRO RIVER TRAIL

San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area

Sierra Vista
ARIZONA

LENGTH: 27 miles one way, or 8 miles one way for the San Rafael del Valle section

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 3,762-4,071 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

FACILITIES: restrooms, bookstore, picnic tables at San Pedro House, restroom at Hereford Bridge

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, take Interstate 10 east toward Tucson. Continue to the State Route 90 Fort Huachuca/Sierra Vista exit 302. Follow the SR 90 signs through Sierra Vista, then...

San Pedro House Trailhead:

From Sierra Vista, continue east on AZ 90 to milepost 328 and turn right (south) at the sign just before the bridge.

Hereford Bridge Trailhead:

From Sierra Vista, continue east on State Route 90 to Moson Road (traffic light just past milepost 325), turn right and continue 7.6 miles to Hereford Road. Turn left, go 4.6 miles and turn right at the sign just past milepost 8 before the bridge. Roads are paved up to the 0.1-mile access roads, which are good gravel.

From its headwaters in Sonora, Mexico, to the confluence with the Gila River near Winkelman, the San Pedro River flows 140 miles north through 57,000 acres of riparian wildlife habitat, surrounded by scrub and sprawling grasslands of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts.

Cradled between the high peaks of the Huachuca Mountains and the ore-rich hills around Bisbee, the river is one of the last free-flowing waterways in the Southwest. Over its lacy course, it unfolds in idiosyncratic oxbows, linear pools, marshes and mesquite-cluttered floodplains, giving a glimpse of what the area might have looked like to ancient inhabitants.

The 27-mile San Pedro River Trail runs adjacent to the water. Web and spur paths leading to the muddy banks and pebble-strewn sandbars add myriad opportunities for viewing some of the 350 species of birds, 80 species of mammals, 68 kinds of reptiles and amphibians and two species of native fish that reside in a forest of cottonwood, willow and ash trees.

Numerous trailheads and backcountry camping areas spread long the trail's length, making for easy car shuttle, day hike or backpack outings. The well-signed route is peppered with sites that chronicle the area's human history. There's a Clovis Paleo-Indian culture locale (11,000-8,000 B.C.), petroglyph gallery, mammoth kill pit, remnants of Spanish and Mexican colonial explorations and the foundations of territorial ranching and mining outposts.

Taking it all in is a multi-day venture, but for a quick day trip or to learn more about the conservation area, a good place to start is at the San Pedro House trailhead. Here, knowledgeable volunteers from the Friends of the San Pedro River host guided hikes and are on hand to help optimize your itinerary. This is also the stepping-out point for a trek along the San Rafael del Valle section of the route that culminates 8 miles upstream at the Hereford Bridge trailhead.

Vermilion Flycatcher

LENGTH: 20 miles of trails

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 3,610-4,250 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: The Sonoita Creek State Natural Area is always open, but visitor center hours vary by season. Permits for hiking, hunting and horseback riding in the natural area can be obtained from the park gatehouse or by calling 520-287-2791.

FEE: $15-$20 daily per vehicle

FACILITIES: primitive, hike-in camping; major amenities available at adjacent Patagonia Lake State Park

GETTING THERE:

400 Lake Patagonia Rd., Patagonia:

From Tucson, go 17 miles east on Interstate 10 to the State Route 83 exit 281. Head 24 miles south on SR 83 to the SR 83/82 junction in Sonoita. Turn right (west) on SR 82 and continue 7 miles to Lake Patagonia Road. Turn right and go 4 miles to the Patagonia Lake State Park gate. Pay the entry fee and proceed to the visitor center to get a free hiking permit for the natural area. Only a limited number of hikers (and horses) are allowed in the natural area at any time. Call ahead if you're hiking with a group.

SONOITA CREEK STATE NATURAL AREA

Patagonia

The 9,453-foot summit of Mount Wrightson is a magnet for winter snow and summer rain. This year-round precipitation is the source of the perennial waters flowing through the Sonoita Creek State Natural Area.

Located south of the sky-scraping Santa Rita Mountains near the vineyards of Arizona's southern wine region, the preserve was established in 1994 to protect the fragile watershed and riparian corridor. More than 20 miles of hiking trails wander through the 9,959-acre site that encompasses seven types of vegetative communities, from semi-desert grassland to moist deciduous forests, along the creek.

For an overview of the area, begin with the 0.7-mile, 500-foot climb up the Overlook Trail. On the summit, there are terrific views of adjacent Patagonia Lake and the peaks of the San Cayetano and Patagonia mountains huddling around ocotillo-studded savanna. To the east, the creek appears as a green ribbon dressing up the muted hills and gullies that bevel toward the water's twisting groove. A diverse menu of trails offers treks into the arid foothills, the lake dam and spillway, up into the Coal Mine Spring watershed and, of course, walks along the creek.

Maps available at the visitor center and ample junction signage make navigation simple. One of the most popular day hikes is the easy, 4-mile Sonoita Creek-Cottonwood Loop circuit, which begins with a 1.5-mile walk through high desert and ends with a spindle plunge into the creek channel and traipse through a lush forest of ash, willow, mesquite and walnut trees. For an extended, more challenging hike, continue along the Railroad Trail, which makes a stepping-stone creek cross to follow the abandoned bed of the Arizona and New Mexico Railway 3 miles to the confluence with the Santa Cruz River. This section of trail is subjected to the whims of nature, so look for cairns where the path gets erased by floods or downed trees.

In addition to proper gear and plenty of water, binoculars come in handy for viewing the more than 315 bird species – including the brilliant red Vermilion Flycatcher – that inhabit the area.

SUTHERLAND TRAIL

Catalina State Park

Amazing geology, abundant wildlife and a fantastic fusion of terrains are just a few of the many features of the Sutherland Trail in Tucson. The 9-mile route begins as a groomed path in Catalina State Park and ends near the top of Mount Lemmon, where it intersects the Arizona Trail.

The trail melds a collection of tame walks and grueling mountain climbs. Its dramatic mood shifts can be attributed to the contrasting ambiences of the park, Coronado National Forest, Pusch Ridge Wilderness and a protected Desert Bighorn Sheep Management Area. Whether you're interested in the full-strength trek or a mild sampler, Sutherland Trail adapts to fit. Its first 2.6 miles are within park boundaries and make for an approachable stroll with minimal climbing. The well-signed route complements the park's diverse repertoire of trails, offering a customizable, visually rich journey.

The route departs the main trailhead, tracing the sandy course of Sutherland Wash at the base of the Pusch Ridge and the Santa Catalina Mountains. Draped by mesquite trees and flanked by a wall of massive saguaros, this easy passage puts the granitic pinnacles and deep fractures of the Catalinas front and center. Soaring to over 8,000 feet, the geologically complicated mountains are the result of millions of years of upheavals, volcanism and erosion that's still shaping the landscape today.

Within a half mile, the trail makes a dip into the wash, where a smattering of velvet ash, willow and other riparian trees sink their roots deep into the sandy pediment. During wet periods, when water shimmies over the soft channel, hikers must use stepping stones and sandbars to hop the rivulets. A few steps beyond the crossing on a knoll above the wash, a metal sign gives a fly-over explanation about the formation of the mountains seen across the wash.

Just around the bend at the junction with the park's 2.3-mile Canyon Loop circuit, the trail begins its uphill assault. For a shorter option, take the easy loop, which gains only 300 feet of elevation as it crosses the wash several times on its way back to the trailhead.

From this point, Sutherland Trail ascends to a sunny grassland above the Canada del Oro – a natural, water-carved channel that carries runoff from the watershed of Mount Lemmon. A short climb up a ridge on wooden steps opens up views of cobbled stream terraces and the Tucson Mountains to the west. Replete with cholla, wild grasses and fruit-bearing shrubs, this open, savanna-like segment ducks in and out of the wilderness and the bighorn sheep management area on a slender, meandering single track.

As it passes among jointed boulders stuffed with crystalized quartz, patches of mesquite, floodplains and soaptree yuccas growing from cracked stone outcroppings, the route takes on a more primitive feel. At the 2.6-mile point, it's decision time. To continue on Sutherland, head right at the Trail Link junction for a difficult ascent up toward Mount Lemmon. For an 8.8-mile loop, follow the link 2.2 miles and take the 50 Year Trail south back to the park. Otherwise, retrace your steps and enjoy the tour in reverse.

LENGTH: Full trail: 9.1 miles one way; park segment: 2.6 miles one way

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: Full trail: 2,700-8,560 feet; park segment: 2,700-3,360 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

HOURS: 5 a.m.-10 p.m.

FEE: $7 daily fee per vehicle

FACILITIES: restrooms, water, visitor center, store, horse staging area, camping by reservation

DOGS: leashed dogs allowed in park, but not in Desert Bighorn Sheep Management Area

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the Tangerine Road exit 240 and go east to State Route 77 (Oracle Road). Turn left (south) and continue 0.7 mile to the park entrance on the left.

Pay fee at the gate and continue 1.4 miles to the trailhead.

SWEETWATER PRESERVE

Tucson

Protecting a critical wildlife corridor between the Tucson Mountains and the Santa Cruz River, Sweetwater Preserve also complements a trail-rich area of west Tucson that includes Saguaro National Park and Tucson Mountain Park. Within the 880-acre property, 16 interconnected trails combine for over 12 miles of non-motorized-use routes. For a smallish site, the trails are surprisingly varied.

Locals seem to favor the Saguaro Vista Trail as a starting point for exploration. This cactus-cluttered pathway gets you into the good stuff quickly. Within a few minutes of mild uphill hiking, views of the Santa Catalina Mountains rising over downtown Tucson and a wildly contorted crested saguaro provide ample photo opportunities. The trail then swings northwest, where the graceful arms of chain fruit cholla and palo verde trees frame the mounds of Wasson and Amole Peaks. While Saguaro Vista lives up to the hype, the fun doesn't end there.

LENGTH: 12.93 miles total

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 2,466-2,680 feet

BEST SEASON: October - April

HOURS: Dawn to dusk daily

DOGS: must be on leash; owners must pick up and pack out waste

GETTING THERE:

Sweetwater Trailhead, 4001 N. Tortolita Road, Tucson:

From Interstate 10 in Tucson, take the El Camino Del Cerro/ Ruthrauff Road exit 252. Head right (west), go 2.6 miles to North Tortolita Road, turn left and continue 1 mile to the trailhead.

Each trail junction within the preserve is marked with excellent map signs that make finding your way around a cinch. The signs show a mind-boggling menu of trails that might leave you wondering which way to go. No worries – there are no bad choices.

Black Rock Loop skirts the preserve's far north sector for expansive views and a walk among jumbled basalt outcroppings. Lost Arrow Trail contours foothills above the gorge of Sweetwater Wash, while The Spine traces a decommissioned road atop a sunny ridgeline. Take your pick – each trail has its own flavor and scenic qualities. Mixing and matching makes for a perfect way to spend an hour or a day in the desert.

WEBB PEAK-ASH CREEK LOOP

Pinaleño Mountains

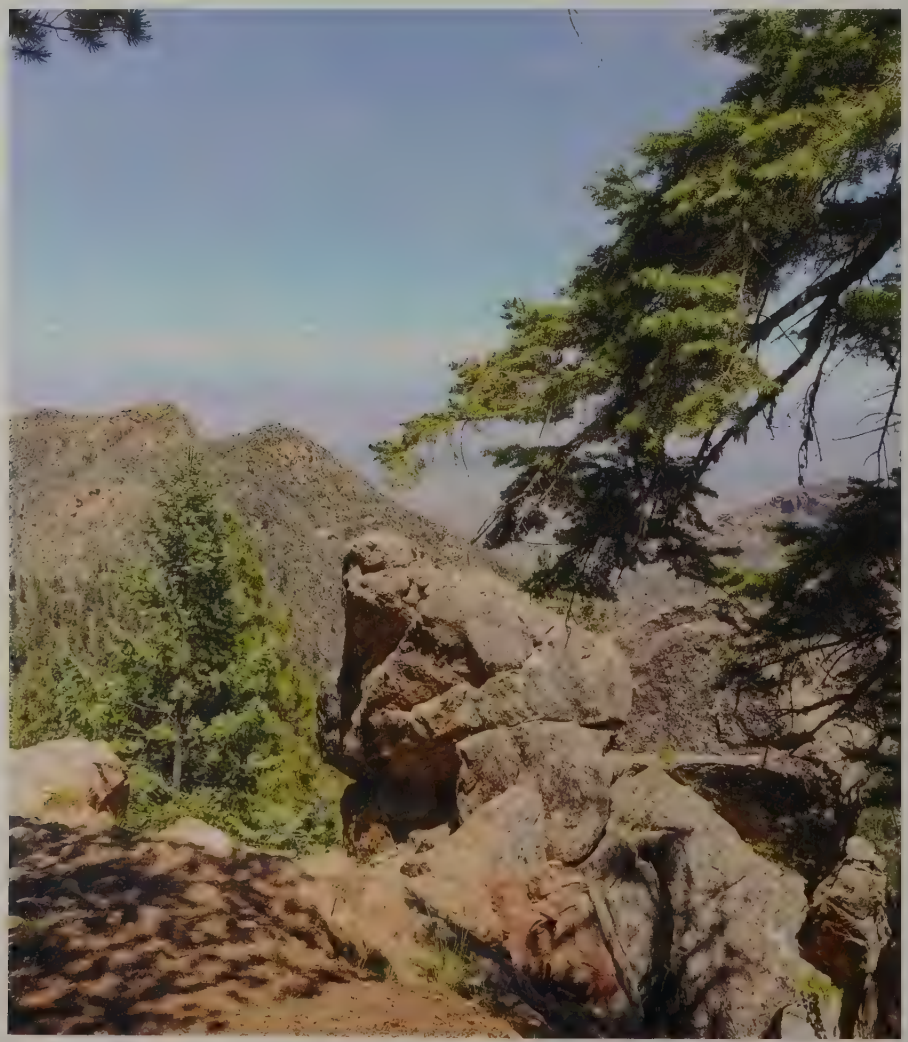
COCHISE COUNTY
EXPLORECOCHISE.COM

Brushing the clouds at nearly 10,000 feet in elevation, Webb Peak hovers above the Gila Valley where, in summer, triple-digit heat hangs in a stifling haze.

Enjoy the refreshing climate of the Pinaleños with a scenic drive up the Swift Trail, which rises 6,400 feet over 29 miles. Temperatures drop as the road passes through desert scrub, juniper, chaparral and oak before entering coniferous forests where it's typically 20 degrees cooler than at the base of the mountain.

From a distance, the summit looks formidable. In reality, hiking to the top of this peak is only moderately challenging. When combined with a side trip to nearby Ash Creek Falls, it makes for a memorable journey.

Rushing water, alpine meadows, a fire tower, mountain slopes fleeced in spruce and fir, far-reaching summit views and dozens of hiking trails make this southeastern Arizona "sky island" (the term for an isolated peak surrounded by arid environments) a popular summer destination for restless hikers.



LENGTH: 8.1 miles round trip

ELEVATION: 9,120-9,960 feet

RATING: moderate

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Safford, go 8 miles south on U.S. 191 to First Avenue (signed "Willcox") and turn right. Follow this road, which becomes Swift Trail (State Route 366), 29 miles to the Columbine corrals and trailhead on the right past the information center. Road is paved for 22 miles, then turns to maintained dirt suitable for passenger cars.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

From the Columbine trailhead, hike 0.5 mile north on Ash Creek Trail 307 to the Webb Peak Trail 345 junction. Veer right here and continue on 307 to the 1.7-mile point, where the trail splits. Take the right stem and go 0.7 mile to the falls. From here, backtrack to the Webb Peak junction and head uphill. The route crosses the summit and loops back to the Columbine trailhead.

WILD BURRO TRAIL

Tortolita Mountains, Marana

A beautifully landscaped drive through groomed communities surrounding the Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain resort sets the tone for this posh hike in the Tortolita Mountains north of Tucson. The elegant Wild Burro trailhead is wrapped in colorful plantings and features white-glove clean restrooms, a shaded picnic table and a map kiosk. Two enormous granite monoliths with mineral-green patinas add a finishing, regal cachet to an impeccably designed threshold to pleasant hiking.

Access to the Wild Burro Trail – which serves as a backbone for the nine routes of the Tortolita Mountain system – begins with a descent into a wash and a short trek to the trail proper. Turn left here and hike a half mile north (in full view of resort guests lounging on their balconies) to a major hub junction. Here, another map kiosk and a rainbow of color-coded arrows help with navigation. Turn left again to stay on Wild Burro – the "purple" trail – and follow strategically placed signs as the trail skips across grainy substrates into a canyon bend. It winds through the filtered shade of ironwood thickets and secret finds such as rock art etched into a jumble of boulders near the junction for the Lower Javelina Trail.

At 2.2 miles, the path makes a sharp left up an embankment, emerging at the ruins of masonry "line shack" and a concrete basin. The trail heads steeply uphill over rocky terrain to a scenic lookout area, another petroglyph site and a short descent to Alamo Spring. The spring is a popular turnaround point for many; but the trail continues into Tortolita Mountain Park with loop options for longer return routes.

LENGTH: 2.8 miles one way (Alamo Spring); 6.3 miles one way (full trail)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,810-3,100 or 3,920 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

14810 N. Secret Springs Dr., Marana:

From Interstate 10 in Marana, take the Tangerine Road exit 240. Go 4.9 miles east to Dove Mountain Boulevard. Go left, go 4.5 miles and turn right through a traffic circle. Trailhead is less than a mile up the road.

WILD MUSTANG TRAIL

Tortolita Mountains, Marana

If you dig deep enough into the barrel of misunderstood hiking routes, you just might discover a gem like the Wild Mustang Trail. Because it snuggles up to the Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain property in Marana, access to the trail requires a stroll past groomed gardens, posh casitas and a golf course. Not exactly the stuff of hard-core hiker dreams. But hold on to your horses – the scenery quickly transitions from fancy to fierce.

Getting to the Wild Mustang Trail requires the use of connecting routes that are signed with color-coded posts. The trail can be hiked as an out-and-back trek or tied into several loop options. The West Rim Loop is a great one. The first 1.4 miles of the hike follow a wash in full view of the resort. After that, it ascends 1,250 feet into the raw beauty of the Tortolita Mountains, where crested saguaros can be spotted at nearly every turn. At one time, there were 43 documented in the area, but a freeze culled the count to about 30. Some are located along the trails, while others hide out in distant clefs and gullies. With patience and a keen eye, you can see nine contorted cacti on this loop.

When hiking here, it's important to respect the terrain and know your limits. Despite the various springs shown on maps, there's no water and very little shade. While the lower trails are simple strolls, the mountain routes are rough, so you'll need lots of water, sun protection and snacks.

What the hike lacks in sightings of its namesake feral equine beasts, it more than makes up for at a 3,850-foot saddle with views of a dozen mountain ranges jutting over the Tucson area. The site is outfitted with interpretive signs and a bench that makes for a perfect spot to take a break and scope out the profiles of Mt. Wrightson, Kitt Peak and a patchwork of farmlands of the Santa Cruz and Avra Valleys.

Petroglyphs

At 3.8 miles, the Wild Mustang Trail is the longest leg of the loop and exudes a primitive, remote feel. At one point, its cactus population rivals that of nearby Saguaro National Park, accented with a plethora of blooming yucca and sotol growing among granite boulders and metamorphic slickrock. The trail's high point features dizzying vistas of the Santa Catalina Mountains and Pusch Ridge without a pool or putting green in sight.

After the long climb, the route makes a steep, rocky dive into Wild Burro Canyon. You'll pass Alamo Spring, two historical line houses and several scenic lookouts before landing in sandy washes for the final trudge back to the trailhead.

LENGTH: 8.7-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,810-4,060 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

Wild Burro Trailhead,14810 N. Secret Springs Dr., Marana:

From Phoenix, go south on Interstate 10 to Tangerine Road exit 240. Go 4.9 miles east to Dove Mountain Boulevard, turn left and continue 4.5 miles to a traffic circle. Turn right through the circle and and pass the Ritz-Carlton gatehouse. Trailhead is less than a mile up the road.

From the trailhead, follow the short access path and turn left (north) on Wild Burro Trail (purple). Go 0.5 mile north and turn left onto Upper Javelina Trail (red) and follow it 0.9 mile to Wild Mustang Trail (orange). Turn right and hike 4.2 miles to Wild Burro Trail (purple), turn right (south) and follow it 2.7 miles back to trailhead.

NORTHERN ARIZONA
Flagstaff
Williams
Munds Park
Tusayan,
Kaibab National
Forest
Coconino
National Forest
Kachina Peaks
Wilderness Area
Classic
Mountain Treks
Lakeside Hikes
Historic Sites
Volcanoes

ABINEAU-BEAR JAW LOOP

Kachina Peaks Wilderness Area, Flagstaff

Known for its carousel of changing views and ecosystems, the Abineau-Bear Jaw loop is among the most popular hikes in the Flagstaff area. The three-leg circuit's multiple personality can be experienced several ways, although most hikers prefer to tackle the tougher part first by beginning on the Abineau Trail. From the trailhead, follow the access path to the trail register and the beginning of the loop. The Abineau Trail is steeper, but gets the hard climbing out of the way faster. The Bear Jaw Trail has a more moderate but longer ascent. The Abineau Trail climbs aggressively on rugged terrain through dense, mossy coniferous forests with willowy aspens tucked into sunny spots. The route clings to the canyon's precipitous edge as is passes among enormous Douglas firs, rocky chutes and exposed ledges.

Near the top of the canyon, flattened trees and a river of debris mark the site of a February 2005 avalanche that scoured a large portion of the upper trail. The rehabilitated path traces the canyon's western slopes, culminating at a highpoint below the barren north face of Humphreys Peak and the junction with Waterline Road. From this breezy saddle, views of the San Francisco Volcanic Field and the Painted Desert roll out to the north. With the major climbing done and the deep woodlands behind, the hike transitions into a view-centric journey through some of Arizona's most magnificent stands of aspen trees. To connect with the Bear Jaw Trail, follow wide, tree-fringed Waterline Road downhill 2 miles to the easy-to-miss sign on the left.

During fall foliage season, the aspens along Waterline Road are the first to change color. In most years, the leaves are already spent as early as late September, but golden canopies can still be observed in the lower elevations through mid-October. Except for a few tricky spots where the route swerves around drainages, the Bear Jaw Trail is an easy-to-follow walk through enchanting white-barked forests and alpine meadows with the comfort of knowing that it's all downhill back to the trailhead.

◆ 🍁

LENGTH: 7.2-mile loop

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 8,500-10,400 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go north on U.S. 180 (Fort Valley Road) to milepost 235.2 and turn right onto Forest Road 151 (Hart Prairie Road, north access). Continue 1.6 miles on FR 151 and connect to Forest Road 418. Drive 3.1 miles on FR 418 to FR 9123J (signed for Abineau-Bear Jaw), turn right and go 0.6 mile to the trailhead. Dirt and cinder roads are rutted but passable by carefully driven sedans.

ARIZONA TRAIL PASSAGE 30: ANDERSON MESA

Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff

Passage 30 of the Arizona Trail passes though windswept prairies and juniper-dotted plains of the plateau lakes area south of Flagstaff. This easy-to-access route wanders past three ephemeral lakes (Vail, Prime and Horse) on Anderson Mesa northeast of Mormon Lake. These fugitive "lakes" vacillate between hip-deep pools and soggy swales in sync with rainfall. Regardless of water levels, the mesa manages to stay moist enough to support plenty of flora and fauna. During spring, the meadows bloom with Woodhouse phlox, lupines and yellow spiny daisies.

Throughout the trek, views of Flagstaff's San Francisco Peaks dominate the horizon, while scurrying lizards and rabbits make frequent appearances in the meadows. For an easy, 10.5-mile day hike, park vehicles at both the Marshall Lake and Horse Lake trailheads.

LENGTH: 7.6 miles round trip (as described here)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 7,090-7,142 feet

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

Horse Lake (south) trailhead:

From Flagstaff, go 16.3 miles south on Lake Mary Road (Forest Road 3) to milepost 327. Turn right on Forest Road 82E (Ashurst Lake/Pine Grove) and continue 0.7 mile. The Horse Lake trailhead is ahead on the left.

Marshall Lake (north) trailhead:

From Flagstaff, go 10.5 miles south on Lake Mary Road (Forest Road 3) to Forest Road 128 on the left (signs says observatory – it's easy to miss). Go 2 miles on curvy FR128 to the big Marshall Lake sign/fence, turn left and continue less than a mile to the signed AZT parking area.

BENHAM TRAIL

Kaibab National Forest, Williams

Heading west from Flagstaff on Interstate 40, the distinctive profile of Bill Williams Mountain juts over sprawling prairies criss-crossed with railroad tracks and remnants of Historic Route 66. The mountain's lumpy appearance is the result of multiple volcanic events that caused lava to accumulate in irregular heaps. The eruptions that occurred roughly 4.2 to 2.8 million years ago mark the western edge of the San Francisco Volcanic Field – an arc of molten rock relics that includes San Francisco Mountain (Humphreys Peak) and stretches from Williams to northeast of Flagstaff. Mountains like this one are just too tempting not to conquer.

Three ways to get to its summit have been established. You could drive to the top on the dirt road, but what fun is that? A more entertaining way up is to hike one of the single-track trails. Although both routes are about the same length, each offers a unique experience. Bill William Mountain Trail makes a straight-up climb on the massif's lush, aspen- and fern-populated north face. An easier, albeit still challenging, route is the Benham Trail, which employs long switchbacks to take much of the sting out of its ascent of the mountain's dryer eastern flank. On the way up, look for expansive views of Garland Prairie, Sycamore Canyon Wilderness and a living slideshow of Flagstaff-area peaks poking through canopies of Gambel oak.

Near the top, you'll encounter some aspens, fir, spruce and mossy rocks before the trail lands at a saddle with photogenic views of an impressive, pine-fleeced pinnacle called Finger Rock. From this scenic landing, head right on the dirt road for the final half-mile trudge to the top. On the summit, an array of humming communication towers and a 1937 vintage fire lookout hover above swarms of brilliant red-orange ladybugs that congregate on shrubs and stony outcroppings. The best time to see the annual beetle convergence is from late spring through summer.

◆ 🍁

LENGTH: 9 miles round trip

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 7,300-9,256 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restroom

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 40 in Williams, take exit 165 and follow Railroad Road 2.4 miles to Fourth Street. Turn left and continue 3.6 miles south (Fourth St. becomes Perkinsville Road/County Road 73) to the trailhead turnoff past milepost 181. Roads are paved/gravel and sedan-friendly.

BERRY ROAD

Coconino National Forest

A drive along Lake Mary Road, which runs between Flagstaff and State Route 87 at the edge of the Mogollon Rim south of the community of Happy Jack, is a dramatic tour of Arizona's Plateau Lakes region and the high-country woodlands of Coconino National Forest.

A particularly scenic section passes by Upper and Lower Lake Mary and Mormon Lake. At roughly 2 miles across, Mormon Lake is Arizona's largest natural lake. Fed mostly by snowmelt, the lake's surface area vacillates between a substantial pool and swampy swales depending on seasonal precipitation. The easiest way to view this natural wonder is to make a stop at one or both of the scenic lookout points on Lake Mary Road. The northernmost overlook near milepost 322 sits on a rise at the lake's northeast corner, while a second point 2 miles to the south offers dizzying lake vistas from the top of vertical cliffs of volcanic stone.

Both sites have interpretive signs that describe land features and wildlife to look for while visiting the area. If you have a sharp eye, you might notice a rough road below the lookouts that traces a ledge above the lake. This is the old Lake Mary frontage road, better known as Berry Road. If you're intrigued by the cliff-top vistas and want to get a closer look, take this low road.

The easy trek begins at a gate where the old road has been closed to motorized use. Open to hikers, equestrians and mountain bikers, the route offers excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing and exploring a bounty of fruit-bearing native plants. It's not called Berry Road for naught.

The crumbling byway, with remnants of the chrome-colored paint that marked the median, is a lush wildlife buffet. Arizona walnut trees, Utah service berry, wax currants, skunk bush and blueberry elders drip with fruit in late summer. The abundance of wild foods attract swarms of wildlife. If you walk quietly and gaze over the lake, you're almost certain to see waterfowl, hawks, pronghorn and elk foraging among bulrushes.

Between shady stands of ponderosa pines, Gambel oaks, junipers, cottonwoods and aspens, great views of Mormon Mountain, which rises to 8,456 feet above the lake's western shore, fill the horizon. To the northwest, the San Francisco Peaks appear as a hazy purple silhouette.

At the 1.4-mile point, the road bumps up against stony escarpments below the south lookout site. Here, a jungle of Arizona walnut trees brushing against columns of basalt cinch the road, and clouds of pollinators hover around dozens of wildflower species, including poison milkweed, globemallow and wild geraniums that sprout from cracks in the pavement. The first substantial group of aspens appears at around the 3-mile point, where the north lookout site is just barely visible ahead on a prominent ridge above the road. Across the pond, lakeside homes and structures of the major recreation hub surrounding Mormon Lake Village peek out from a thick tree cover. This popular summer getaway destination is a huge draw for visitors interested in the area's recreational amenities. What's left of the old frontage road fades into a murky contour of the lake just beyond the north lookout site.

You may follow the weed-encroached path a little farther, but it's best to leave this feral terminus and its fruits and nuts to the birds and beasts and backtrack to the lodge for pizza and beer instead.

LENGTH: 6.4 miles out and back

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 7,182-7,031 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 24.8 miles south on Lake Mary Road (Forest Road 3) to an unsigned road on the right just past milepost 319 where there's a sign that reads "no vehicle turnaround." Low-clearance vehicles should park along the pullouts here, otherwise drive the road 0.2 mile, cross a cattle guard, turn right at a fork, continue 0.1 mile uphill and park near a locked gate.

Arizona Walnut

BILL WILLIAMS MOUNTAIN TRAIL

Kaibab National Forest, Williams

Switchbacks are zigzagging cuts in mountain trails designed to make steep ascents easier by adding miles and tempering vertical slopes. Don't look for them on Bill Williams Mountain Trail 21.

Constructed as a horse trail in 1902 to service the fire tower on the summit, this trail wastes no time on switchbacks, plowing straight up in abrupt, heart-pumping style. Most of the route is canyon-bound and thick with trees, vines and flowering shrubs. Views are sparse until the trail emerges on a ridgeline below the summit where fir trees and aspens embellish breathtaking vistas.

LENGTH: 8 miles round trip

ELEVATION: 6,900-9,256 feet

RATING: moderate

BEST SEASONS: May-October

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 30 miles west on Interstate 40 to exit 161. Go south on Railroad Avenue. Follow signs to the ranger station and trailhead.

Orange Gooseberry
Blooms: April-September

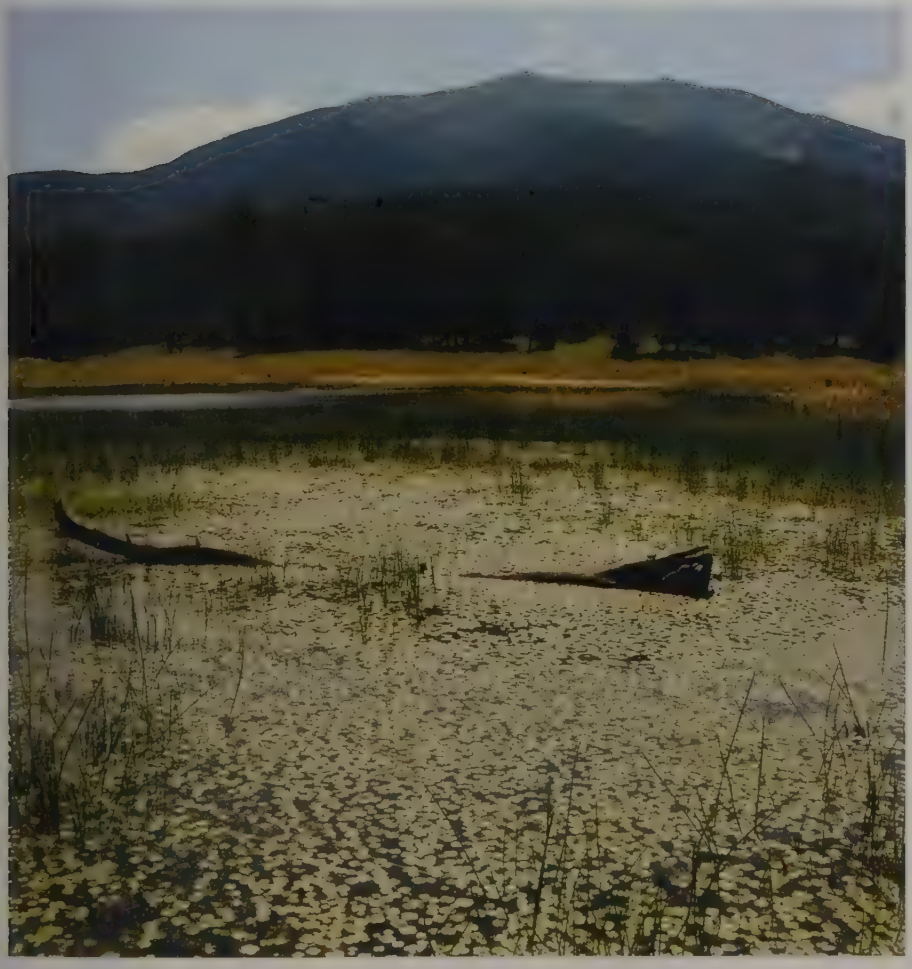
BISMARCK LAKE to SNOWBOWL ROAD

Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff

One of the most scenic segments of the state-traversing Arizona Trail, Passage 34, San Francisco Peaks, is 35.3 miles in length. However, day hikers in search of a shorter out-and-back excursion can sample one of the prettiest parts of this passage by trekking from Bismarck Lake to Snowbowl Road.

From the lake trailhead, the route heads east through shady fir forests and alpine meadows, meeting the turnoff for the lake at the 1-mile point. From here, it's 0.2 miles to the water. The lake itself is a shallow volcanic crater that fills with water during spring snowmelt and monsoon season, ranging in size from a tiny mud puddle to a substantial pond – you never know what you'll find.

Once done exploring the lake, head back to the junction and continue 0.2 mile east (toward the mountains) to the Arizona Trail junction. Go right (south) here and begin the 2.5-mile trek to Snowbowl Road. Along this segment, three beautiful aspen glens break up wildflower-cluttered fields lined with Douglas fir and limber pines. Views of the peaks are interspersed with glimpses of Hart Prairie, Kendrick Peak and Bill Williams Mountain to the west.



Prairie Smoke
Blooms: May - August

LENGTH: 8 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 8,800-9,300 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

Bismarck Lake Trailhead:

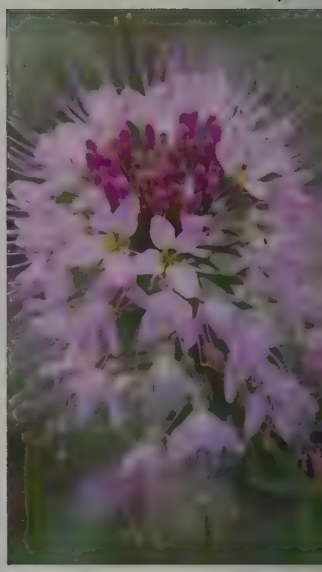
From Flagstaff, go north on U.S. 180, pass milepost 225 and turn right onto Forest Road 151 (south entrance to Hart Prairie Road). Go 6.4 miles on FR 151 to FR 627 (signed for Bismarck Lake), turn right and continue 0.6 miles to the trailhead. FRs 151 and 627 are maintained dirt passable by sedan.

Snowbowl Road Trailhead:

From Flagstaff, go north on U.S. 180 to milepost 223 and turn right onto Snowbowl Road (FR 516). Continue 6.5 miles uphill on FR 516 to the Aspen Corner parking area. To find the trail from here, hike into the woods following a dirt road beginning at the fence opening on the west (left) side of Snowbowl Road for about 0.2 mile to the AZT intersection, located just before where the road enters an open meadow. At the intersection, take a right (north) and follow the signs. Roads are 100 percent paved.

CAMPBELL MESA TRAILS

Flagstaff



Rocky Mountain Bee Plant
Blooms: June-September

LENGTH: 5 loops totaling 11.3 miles

Anasazi Loop: 2.8 miles

Continental Loop: 1.9 miles

Campbell Mesa Loop: 4.9 miles

Walnut Meadows Loop: 3.9 miles

Sinagua Loop: 1.4 miles

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,723-6,880 feet

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go east on Interstate 40 (toward Albuquerque) to the Country Club Road exit 201. Go 1 mile south (right) to Old Walnut Canyon Road (Forest Road 303), turn east (left) and continue 1 mile to the parking area. The trailhead is located roughly 300 feet beyond the gate.

Campbell Mesa Trail System is a series of five interconnected loop hikes. Rubbing elbows with suburbia and a manicured golf course, this trail bundle is easy to access and – believe it or not – actually provides some solitude and decent scenic views.

This mostly flat mesh of wide paths meanders among massive ponderosa pines and sunny meadows with views of Elden Mountain, the San Francisco Peaks, Mormon Mountain and Walnut Canyon. Signage at the trailhead (located 300 feet up the road from the parking area) features a detailed map of the matrix, including mileage between junctions, making it easy to customize your trek.

This area is heavily fire-managed through use of prescribed burns and forest thinning in an attempt to reduce the chance of devastating hot wildfires similar to the recent Shultz Fire, which destroyed much of the Dry Lake Hills area on the northeast flanks of the San Francisco Peaks. Damage from this 2010 blaze is clearly visible from the Anasazi Loop.

CRATER LAKE

Coconino National Forest

The light, porous cinders that put a roll and crunch in your step on the mountain trail that leads to Crater Lake belie the site's fiery origins. When viewed from the dusty dirt roads that pass by its base, the 8,460-foot-high cinder cone volcano blends in with dozens of other mundane hills that dot the Coconino National Forest 20 miles northwest of Flagstaff. But a surprise at the trail's end makes this little mountain special.

During their active phases, cinder cone volcanoes live fast and furious lives. Although they are like a fly in the soup in terms of igneous impact on the landscape when compared to the likes of other nearby volcanic mountains like the San Francisco Peaks or Kendrick Peak, these spitfires leave interesting residuals. The conical hills, which rarely break 1,000 feet in height, form when gas-propelled lava blasts from the earth in what has been described as "curtains of fire." The bubbly spatter flies high into the sky, cooling quickly into bits of ash, cinders (scoria) and pockmarked blobs that fall back to earth to form mounds of pyroclastic debris around the central vent.

The process continues over months to decades before the eruption runs out of gas, the fireworks subside and a belch of viscous lava signals the end of the hill's active period. Thousands to millions of years later, some of these spent magma geysers have taken on second lives as hiking destinations and tourist attractions. Of the roughly 600 cinder cones in the San Francisco Volcanic Field in northern Arizona, several are well-known natural wonders. The collapsed walls of Red Mountain expose complex volcanic structure, while the young, intact Sunset Crater and its raw lava flow is an outdoor science festival.

Others, like the Crater Lake volcano, live a less showy, but still intriguing, retirement. The trek to this quiet geological find is an easy stroll on backroads below the east face of Kendrick Peak. Begin hiking on Forest Road 9009D –a rough two-track – through piney cattle country. At the 0.8-mile point, a series of berms mark where the road has been decommissioned and closed to motorized travel. Follow the road scar another 0.2 mile to Forest Road 9009V on the right, which swerves onto the mountain for a moderate half-mile climb to the rim of the crater. This short climb packs in some terrific views of the San Francisco Peaks, Crowley Park (an open meadow area) and Kendrick Peak.

At the top of the trail, a wood cattle fence serves as a gateway to the jewel of the hike. Directly ahead, a shallow pond shaded by pines and firs fills the basin that was the volcano's central vent. Alive with lush grasses and wildflowers, the aspen-ringed paradise is wrapped in a crusty rim of ragged stone. A walk around the boggy, bowl-like depression reveals evidence of abundant wildlife activity. Footprints and scat speak to the importance of this watering hole to resident elk, deer, raccoons, bears and birds.

Within this cloistered hollow, the rustle of leaves makes it difficult to imagine that hot vapors and flames once spewed from the eroded vent. Sometimes, in the early morning hours, the crater emulates its origins when the summer sun coaxes a smoke-like mist from the dewy swale.

LENGTH: 3 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,955-8,460 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE: From Flagstaff, go 18.3 miles north on U.S. 180 to Forest Road 760 (just past milepost 234). Turn left, continue 0.9 mile and bear right at a fork. At 1.1 miles, continue straight ahead at the crossroads for the Kendrick Snowmobile trails. From this point, continue 1 mile to FR 9009D on the left. The road sign is located roughly 100 feet in from FR 760 and is easy to miss. Park in the roadside pullouts.

CRYSTAL POINT

Coconino National Forest, Munds Park

Cut into a gentle ridgeline where the red rock marvels of Sedona melt into Flagstaff's tall pines and mountainous terrain, Crystal Point Trail provides a taste of both worlds. The trail has been adopted by the Munds Park Trail Stewards (MUTS), an organization that maintains recreational routes around the community. Thanks to volunteer workers who perform regular maintenance, the trail is neatly brushed, signed and switchback-mitigated.

The non-motorized path makes an easy climb through pine-oak woodlands, meadows and edges bolstered by lichen-encrusted boulders. Even in dry years, high-country wildflowers like brilliant blue Franciscan bells add pops of color in sunny spots along the way. The trail's appeal is rooted in its bird's-eye glimpses of Sedona that begin to appear through the trees about a half mile into the hike. Views of rusty escarpments layered with white limestone that stand above the green valleys of the Verde River watershed gain in scope as the route makes its way to Crystal Point. The trail tops out on a knoll at the 1.3-mile point, where a picnic table with ammo boxes full of hiker logs invites visitors to stay awhile, enjoy the sights and peruse the inspiring – sometimes weird – comments scrawled in dog-eared notebooks. While some hikers are satisfied to call this the turnaround point, it's not the end of the trail. The journey may be extended by continuing down the ridge toward Odell Lake. This 2.5-mile segment descends on lazy bends offering even better views than those seen on the summit. Once off the hill, the trail follows a wide ravine to the lake. The shallow reservoir's surface area expands and contracts with precipitation and is a magnet for birds and waterfowl. The path ends at a gate in a residential area at the end of Golden Lake Trail. Although it might be tempting to explore around the lake, much of the land is private property, so be respectful.

From trail's end, you could make a loop by hiking 1.3 miles on paved streets back to the trailhead, but it's not very interesting. Instead, head back the way you came for a rewind viewing of a pleasant show.

LENGTH: 3.3 miles one way

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,480-7,190 feet

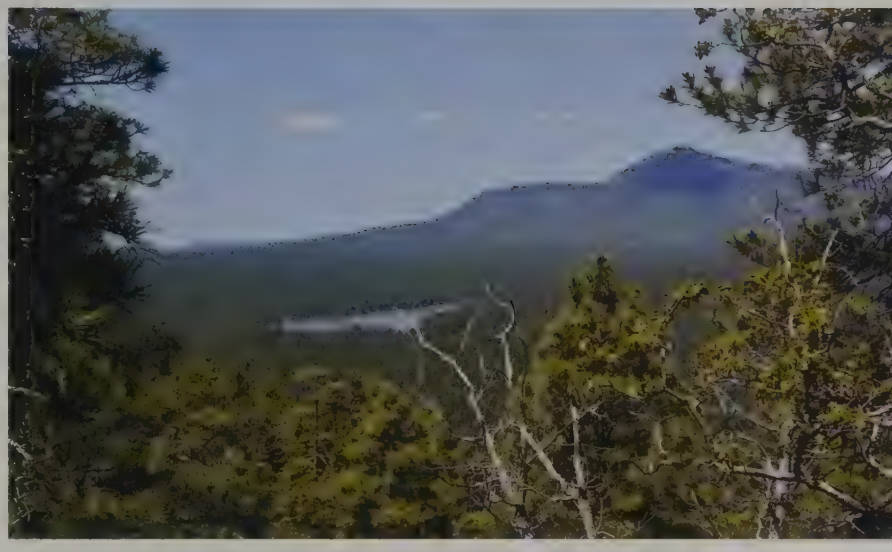
BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17, take the Munds Park exit 322 and continue 2 miles east on Pinewood Boulevard (Forest Road 240) to the parking area on the left. Trail begins across the road. Roads are paved with a short section of maintained dirt that's fine for all vehicles.

DAVENPORT HILL & DOGTOWN LAKE

Kaibab National Forest, Williams



Situated in the far southwest corner of the San Francisco Volcanic Field – a swath of impressive igneous features that arcs from the Northern Arizona town of Williams to Flagstaff – Davenport Hill is an anthill among giants. The 7,805-foot, mesa-like mound near Dogtown Lake, 8 miles southeast of Williams, barely registers a blip on hiker radar and recedes when compared to nearby lava domes and composite volcanoes like Bill Williams Mountain (8,800 feet), San Francisco Peaks (12,633 feet) and Kendrick Peak (10,418 feet).

Like its contemporaries, Davenport Hill sports a scenic trail that leads to its summit. For a less physically demanding but rewarding summit trek, a hike up this little hill delivers the goods without the pain. Deeply wooded for its entire length, the trail twists up the hill's north face through several vegetation zones, terrain types and vista orientations for a continually changing sensory experience.

The trek begins on the Ponderosa Trail, a 1-mile interpretive loop that passes through pine forests at the edge of green wetlands behind the Dogtown Lake dam. The moist swale that bisects this easy loop is a magnet for mountain bluebirds, robins, Steller's jays, waterfowl, elk, bears and furry critters. At the 0.3-mile point, turn right at the Davenport Hill trail sign where the route passes a gate before taking on the mountain in a leisurely mix of short, steep climbs and lingering inclines.

Although the trail ascends 755 feet, flowing switchbacks take most of the sweat and toil out of the climb. The first mile is an effortless stroll through woodlands of Gambel oak, ponderosa pines and sunny clearings. The uphill trudge begins where the trail crosses unsigned Forest Road 717 and moves onto the first of several edge-hugging switchbacks. Breaks in the tree cover reveal views of the mountains and prairies of the Kaibab National Forest and the faint clank and hum of passing trains. Look carefully in the direction of the mournful rattles and horns and you might spot a train snaking across the plains. On clear days, the bright white turbines of the Perrin Ranch Wind Energy Center can be seen dotting the plains 13 miles north of Williams. When operating at full capacity, the array of 62, 262-foot-high turbines provide clean energy for more than 20,000 Arizona homes.

Farther up, the trail ducks into a sheer canyon with moss-draped Douglas and white firs. The slim path traverses the canyon walls, landing hikers on the final uphill haul where picture-perfect views of Dogtown Lake and Bill Williams Mountain dominate the horizon. A massive pile of the same reddish lava blobs (and artfully arranged animal bones) found along the trail marks the summit proper. Beyond the super cairn, views of the San Francisco Peaks stand out on the northeast skyline. Descend back to the Ponderosa Trail junction along the same path, but take the opposite fork to complete the loop.

If you're up for more, step out on the informal angler path that circles the lake for an easy 1.8 miles of shoreline hiking around the fishing hole prized for its abundant trout, bass and catfish as well as for watercraft recreation.

LENGTH: 5.6 miles round trip (not including lake circumference hike)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,050-7,805 feet

BEST SEASON: April-August

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic tables; camping by reservation only

GETTING THERE:

In Williams, go 3.8 miles south on Fourth Street (County Road 73/Perkinsville Road) to Forest Road 140. Turn east (left) onto FR 140 and go 2.8 miles to FR 132, turn north (left) onto FR 132 and go 1.2 miles to the boat ramp at Dogtown Lake campground. From the boat ramp parking area, follow the Ponderosa Trail 0.2 mile to the Davenport Hill trail junction.

DEVIL DOG LOOP

Kaibab National Forest, Williams

The year 1926 marked the birth of two American icons – Route 66 and Devil Dogs snack cakes. That year, the Mother Road, which runs from Chicago to Los Angeles, received its official numerical designation, and the Drake Baking Company rolled out the chocolate cream-filled treats. So, how do these bits of trivia distill into a story about hiking? Easy – the subject route begins at the Interstate 40 Devil Dog exit and follows two decommissioned sections of Historic Route 66.

Although it's more likely that the Devil Dog Loop 117 was named for the World War I moniker for U.S. Marines instead of the kiddie lunch box staple, the trail makes a name for itself as a history-steeped walk in the forest.

LENGTH: 5-mile loop

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,236-6,800 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 40 in Williams, go 6 miles west to the Devil Dog exit 157 for Forest Road 108. Follow FR 108 to the first "T" junction, go right, then make a left at the next "T" and continue to the kiosk and parking loop on the right.

For much of the 20th century, Route 66 served as a major highway through Northern Arizona. Its demise came with the construction of Interstate 40, which gradually replaced the scenic road with a modern freeway. The section near Williams was completed in 1984. Except for preserved segments that run through places like Flagstaff and Winslow, all that remains of Route 66 are weedy tracks and patches of cracked asphalt.

Our nostalgia for artifacts of simpler times motivates us to preserve historic transportation corridors by repurposing them into recreational trails. That's what was done with the decommissioned 1922 and 1932 realignments of Route 66 west of Williams. The circuit isn't difficult to navigate, as long as you pay attention. There are a few bike emblem trail markers, but they are easy to miss. From the trailhead kiosk, continue hiking south on Forest Road 108. At 0.4 mile, the road meets the grassy swale of Stump Tank. Go left at the next junction, hike to the 0.7-mile point and veer right. At 0.9 miles, the road meets the loop portion of the route. Go right at the Hat Ranch sign (the left fork is the return route). After a short distance, a rough dirt road veers off to the left – this is the 1922 alignment (aka Forest Road 45). Follow this road to the 2-mile point and go straight at the junction. At 2.4 miles, the trail loops back on the 1932 alignment (Forest Road 9217E).

Remnants of pavement and stonework culverts conjure images from John Steinbeck's Depression-era novels and pre-digital days when folks cruised in Model Ts, Studebakers and souped-up Chevys.

To get your fix of axle grease and chrome, head to the town of Williams, which hosts several classic car shows each year. You can almost always spot a few restored beauties parked near the midcentury-themed diners that line the downtown streets. For those who enjoy hiking to music, won't you get hip to this timely tip: download one of the many iterations of the tune "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66." The 1946 Nat King Cole version is a master class in rhythm and blues, but if you prefer a rock spin, try the one by the Rolling Stones. Either song will put a hop in your step as you trek through history.

FAY CANYON

Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff

With numerous limestone caves, ancient sand dune rock formations and acres of alpine meadows, Arizona's *other* Fay Canyon is a joy to explore. Unlike the famous (and crowded) Fay Canyon located in Sedona's high desert, this trail sees much less activity. Conveniently located in the Mormon Lake area, this route through a shallow valley connects with the Walnut Canyon Passage of the Arizona Trail, Flagstaff Urban Trails System and Sandy's Canyon.

The trail is almost completely shaded as it travels the margins of a lush gorge flanked with bizarre geological structures and deep canyon drop-offs. To add length, include a side trip to Fisher Point. From the trailhead, hike 0.3 mile along the double-track dirt road paralleling Lake Mary Road. At the gate and fence located where the road makes a sharp right hand turn, pass the gate and continue straight (north) along a footpath. From here, the trail is well maintained and easy to follow. At two points along the route, the trail splits – in both cases, stay to the left and take the higher paths. At the 2.6-mile point, Fay Canyon Trail ends at a "Y" intersection with the Arizona Trail. Here, head right (east) along a well-signed path to continue on to Fisher Point.

Rock Mat
Blooms: June-October

LENGTH: 8.2 miles round trip as described here. Fay Canyon alone: 2.6 miles one way

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,220-7,033 feet (to Fisher Point); Fay Canyon only: 6,620-6,950 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 4 miles south on Lake Mary Road to South Wildlife Road. Turn left and drive a few yards to a "T" intersection, veer left and continue less than 0.1 mile to the sign that reads: " Walnut-Skunk-Fay Closure Area, No Motor Vehicles." Parking is very limited. Please respect private property in the area by not blocking roads or driveways.

GRIFFITH SPRING CANYON

Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff

LENGTH: 1.2-mile loop

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,919 feet

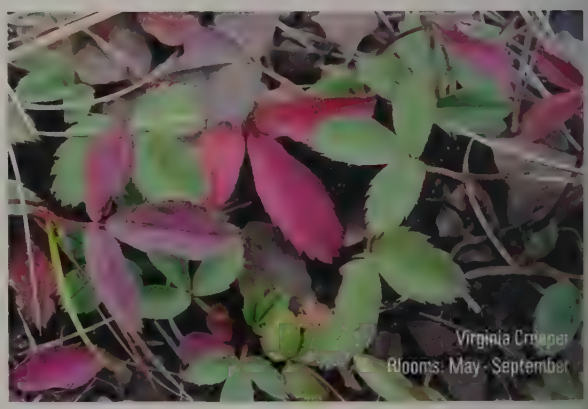
BEST SEASON: April-October. Trailhead is closed in winter.

FACILITIES: restroom, picnic table

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 7 miles south on Interstate 17 to exit 337 for State Route 89A south. From the end of the off ramp (at the entrance to Fort Tuthill Park), turn left (south) and continue 2.4 miles on SR 89A to the signed turnoff for Griffith's Spring. The short, dirt/gravel road to the parking area is rutted but passable by sedan.

Located 23 miles north of Sedona along scenic State Route 89A, Griffith Spring Canyon itself is only mildly impressive. However, this "little canyon that could" makes its mark on the map by collecting and funneling water downhill into two of Sedona's major gorges – Pumphouse Wash and Oak Creek Canyon.



From the trailhead, the route seems kind of ho-hum, but hang in there – good stuff lies ahead if you know how to explore. The trail is wide, flat and easy to follow, tracing the edge of the cliffs above the marshy green canyon. Where the route bottoms out, several obvious spur footpaths leave the main trail and head into a steep-walled riparian corridor. Richly lined with wildflowers, Virginia creeper, wild roses and plenty of poison ivy, the exploratory paths wind through a mucky swale dotted with shallow pools, trickling channels and a tiny wetland ringed with cattails before it dead-ends in about 0.25 mile in a bog near a fenced stand of aspen sprouts.

HOMOLOVI STATE PARK

Please don't call this place a "ruin." Homolovi State Park is a Hopi ancestral village on the high plains of Northeastern Arizona that teems with both animated and spiritual life. Air-breathing, water-slurping terrestrial entities share space with invisible, but very present, human souls who occupied the area from prehistoric times to 1400 A.D.

March is the perfect time to visit. Balmy temperatures and festivities associated with Arizona Archaeology & Heritage Awareness Month add bonus points to a day trip that's enjoyable any time of year. The park is situated at the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau, where the ruddy, sun-backed terrain smacks of NASA images of the surface of Mars.

The lifeline of this striking, unforgiving landscape is the chocolatey flow of the Little Colorado River, which feeds a fringe of greenery on the site's western edge. Five easy hiking trails explore pueblos, dozens of ancillary structures, scattered artifacts and petroglyphs. Standing among the sketchy footprints of plazas and ceremonial structures, it's impossible not to feel a connection with the ancient communities and their descendants. Of the four major 14th-century pueblos within the park, two are open for exploration.

Homolovi I is situated near the river where former inhabitants grew beans, corn and cotton on the fertile floodplain. The Homolovi II site has a half-mile, barrier-free trail that explores the park's largest pueblo, which had between 1,200-2,000 rooms. This hillside site provides beautiful views of treeless plains, the Hopi Buttes and Flagstaff's San Francisco Peaks. To get the most out of this trek, stop by the visitor center and ask about tours, demonstrations and star parties.

Dryopetalon
Blooms: February-May

LENGTH: 4 miles total among five trails: Tsu'vo (0.6), Dine (1.5), Nusungvo (1.2), Homolovi I (0.25), Homolovi II (0.5)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 4,850-4,950 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

HOURS: 8 a.m.-5 p.m. daily

FEE: $7 per vehicle, $3 walk-in/bike-in

FACILITIES: restroom, visitor center

GETTING THERE:

In Winslow, take exit 257 and 90 1.5 miles north on State Route 87.

Western Kingbird

KACHINA WETLANDS via HIGHLANDS TRAIL

Flagstaff

Hidden on a high Flagstaff mesa just about a mile off Interstate 17 is a walk able, 70-acre waterfowl wonderland. The Kachina Wetlands is a collection of eight shallow ponds constructed to manage treated effluent water.

The project, which began in 1988 with the cooperation of various agencies including Northern Arizona University, Arizona Game & Fish and Coconino County, has auxiliary goals to improve wildlife habitats and foster native vegetation. Although some of the ponds are not operational right now, the site is still prime real estate for winged beasts. Cattails, other aquatic plants and mid-pond islands provide safe havens from marauding elk and hungry forest critters for the hundreds of species of birds and waterfowl that frequent the area. The marshy pools are aflutter with grebes, mallards, coots, sandpipers, nighthawks, woodpeckers, swallows, chickadees, jays, warblers, blackbirds and soaring birds of prey.

Until recently, the only hiking opportunity here was the mile or so of circumference paths. That all changed when the Highlands Trail – which connects to Fort Tuthill Park – was completed in 2009. Woodsy but unremarkable, the easy, urban-class Highlands Trail stays close to civilization, dodging public roads and private properties on its 3.7-mile track from the park to the wetlands. The trail wanders through a checkerboard of pine-oak woodlands (with occasional views of the San Francisco Peaks and Mormon Mountain), skirts a few suburban backyards and crosses State Route 89A before reaching the wetlands. Hike directions:

From the Fort Tuthill Yavapai parking lot, hike south on the road on the west side of the amphitheater to where Soldiers Trail (marked by green lathe-style signs) crosses. Head west (go right) and follow Soldiers Trail roughly 0.3 mile to a signed, but unnamed junction. This is the access path for Highlands Trail. Turn left here and within 0.2 mile, you'll come to the north end of the loop portion of Highlands Trail. Go either way and continue 1 or 1.3 miles to State Route 89A. Cross the road and continue 2.5 miles on Highlands to Kachina Wetlands. There are several trails circling the ponds. When done exploring, return the way you came or take the opposite leg of the Highlands loop back to the parking area. Note: Fort Tuthill Park has an "official" trailhead serving all its trails. If you begin there, add another mile to the overall distance shown here.

LENGTH: 9.6 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,890-7,040 feet

BEST SEASON: open year-round, but bird sightings are best spring-fall

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic tables, camping at the park

DOGS: must be on leash and stay out of the wetlands ponds

GETTING THERE:

Fort Tuthill County Park (as described here):

From Interstate17 just south of Flagstaff, take exit 337 for State Route 89A and County Fairgrounds. At the end of the off ramp, continue straight into Ft. Tuthill Park and follow the main road to the Yavapai Ramada parking lot.

Direct access:

From Interstate17 just south of Flagstaff, take exit 333 for Kachina Village. Go left off the access road, drive under the freeway and take the first right on Tovar Trail. Follow this road 1.5 miles to the corner of Tovar Trail and Lohali Trail, park on the right and pass through the gate to the wetlands.

KENDRICK PARK

Coconino National Forest

Two young children, traveling the stretch of U.S. 180 that runs between Flagstaff and the South Rim of the Grand Canyon can feel like being trapped in a careening container with few sights that appeal to their sensibilities. Electronic device-enabled distractions only last so long before cries of "Are we there yet?" and "I have to go potty" demand a break from the drive that flows between pine forests and the desert plains of the Colorado Plateau. The fix is a stop at Kendrick Park Watchable Wildlife Trail.

Complete with walking paths and a restroom, the site that sits on 2,000 acres roughly 20 miles north of Flagstaff offers a chance to stretch legs, decompress and maybe learn a thing or two. The U.S. Forest Service property has two short loop trails that explore biologically diverse spaces in alpine meadows, pine woodlands and aspen glens with excellent views of the San Francisco Peaks (12,633 feet) and Kendrick Peak (10,418 feet). The quarter-mile loop is paved and suitable for strollers and wheelchairs ,while the 1.2-mile outer loop follows a flat dirt trail. Both paths are outfitted with interpretive signs that describe fascinating facts about the area's plants, animals and history.

The compact system is packed with points of interest. An abandoned potato field, corral and campsite document some of the surprising ways people have used the land in the past. Along the outer loop, an aspen recovery area at the edge of sprawling grasslands and signs that explain how wildfires have impacted the landscape illustrate the complex forces that continually shape the delicate ecosystems.

Of course, the big draw here is the opportunity for real-time wildlife viewing. To optimize your chances of seeing animals wandering in their natural habitats, experienced viewers recommend the following tips.

- Plan your timing. Wildlife is most active at dawn and dusk.
- Be invisible. Stay quiet, wear neutral colors and avoid using scented products.
- Be patient. Sit quietly behind a tree or rock and wait for animals to appear.
- Observe from a distance. Keep wildlife wild by giving them their space. Never harass, feed or handle wildlife.

When explored quietly and with respect, the trails at Kendrick Park extend a rest stop into an entertaining, educational tour of a northern Arizona wildlife stomping ground with tantalizing backstories and myriad mini-lessons built in.

LENGTH: 1.5 miles for two loop trails

RATING: easy, the short loop (.25 miles) is barrier-free

ELEVATION: 7,862-7,915 feet

BEST SEASON: May-November

FACILITIES: restroom, no water

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 20 miles north on U.S 180 to the trailhead located between mileposts 235 and 236 on the west side of the road.

KEYHOLE SINK

Kaibab National Forest, Parks

LENGTH: 2 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 7,000-7,100 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go west on Interstate 40 to the Parks exit 178. Connect with Historic Route 66 and go 4.2 miles west (left) to the Oak Hill Snow Play Area on the left. The trailhead is located across the road from the parking lot at a signed gate.

In a peaceful alpine meadow framed by a wispy band of aspen trees lies a "perfect storm" for hunting. From within the 40-foot-high, crescent-shaped granite fortress of Keyhole Sink, there is no easy escape route for the game animals that come to drink from the pools of water that collect at the base of the knobby cliffs.

Ancient hunters played this to their advantage by simply perching on the escarpments above the water and waiting for their "dinner" to arrive. A frenzy of 1,000-year-old etchings on the vertical monolithic walls document the stalkers' conquests. Dense and cluttered, the rock art seems to vibrate with celebration. The ashen, stony walls chatter with images of deer, elk, bears, turtles and birds with a spattering of human forms applauding the triumphs of many good days.

Petroglyphs

LAWS SPRING

Kaibab National Forest

For thousands of years, the turbid but reliable waters of Laws Spring have sustained wave upon wave of indigenous peoples and newcomers alike. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this tiny natural wonder, tucked into a volcanic ravine, has played host to a slew of quirky episodes in American history. We know this because archeologists and modern historians have used hundreds of rock etchings on the basalt boulders that line the Laws Spring trail to reconstruct the area's transition from prehistoric hunting ground and spiritual center into a way station for thirsty Europeans blazing westward trails.

The petroglyphs range from prehistoric, wind-scoured scrawls of elk and mysterious spirals to modern etchings pecked into the smoky black rock veneer to denote the location of the spring. Near the end of the trail, above a muddy pool, a bronze placard mounted to a boulder gives a concise history of the area, which was created in a volcanic cataclysm and steeped in colorful chapters of Americana on the harsh, dusty flatlands of the Kaibab Plateau.

Butter and Eggs
Blooms: May-September

LENGTH: 0.5 mile round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,850-6,900 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, travel west on Interstate 40 to Pittman Valley exit 171 (Forest Road 74). Drive 7.7 miles north to Forest Road 141, turn right and continue 0.5 miles to the intersection with FR 730. Turn left on FR 730 and go 2.25 miles to FR 115, turn left and drive 2 miles to FR 2030. Follow FR 2030 for just under a mile to the circular parking area and the sign for Laws Spring.

LEROUX SPRINGS

Coconino National Forest

LENGTH: 2.6 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 7,520-7,600 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, travel north on U.S. 180 to Snowbowl Road (Forest Road 516) at milepost 223.

Turn right and go 1 mile to where FR 516 makes an abrupt right turn with an unmarked dirt road straight ahead. Park along this road in front of a gate which marks the beginning of the hike.

From the trailhead, pass the gate using the wood stairs and hike 0.3 mile to a fork. Go left here and continue to a second fork, where you'll turn right. At the third fork, go left for Big Leroux or right for Little Leroux.

There's big news at Big Leroux Spring. For the first time in more than a century, this important water source at the base of Flagstaff's San Francisco Peaks has been freed from its 1930s-era concrete box. Well, partially, anyway.

Having been diverted and capped for municipal drinking water for years, the spring box was reconfigured in June 2013, returning a portion of the flow to the surface. This was the first step in the restoration of the site's original wetland ecosystem and possible reintroduction of vanished native plant and animal species.

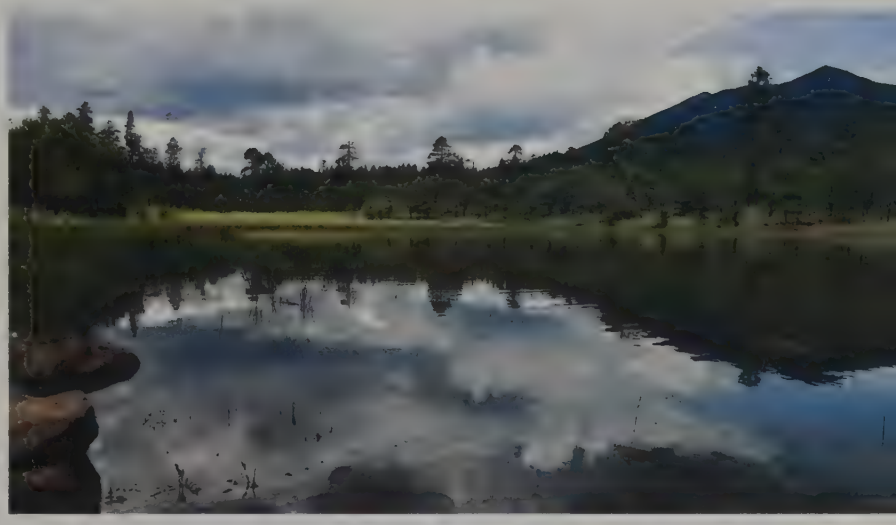
Located at the head of Flagstaff's Rio de Flag watercourse, the sister springs of Big and Little Leroux have been a critical resource for Native Americans, explorers and homesteaders. The springs were named for Antoine Leroux, a prolific 19th-century guide who assisted the Sitgreaves Expedition and the journeys of Lt. Edward Beale (of Beale Wagon Road fame). Ownership of the area has changed hands numerous times over the years. It's currently owned by the U.S. Forest Service and used for firefighter operations and Hotshots headquarters.

The woodlands around the springs have become an outdoor research area where ongoing data collection will aid in future conservation plans. Restoration of the site is mostly a volunteer effort, and although water flow varies with the seasons, a visit to the springs pays homage to the work of the Friends of the Rio de Flag, a local advocacy group toiling to preserve the history and hydrology of Flagstaff's watersheds.

Pine Thermopsis
Blooms: April-July

LITTLE ELDEN TRAIL to SCHULTZ TANK

Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff



Summer wildflowers put on a spectacular show in Flagstaff's Dry Lake Hills area, and a hike along the Little Elden Trail to Schultz Tank is rich in dozens of colorful blooming varieties. This multifaceted trek traces the north flanks of 9,018-foot Little Elden Mountain through deep mixed-conifer woodlands, aspen glens, sunny meadows and a variety of microclimates.

From the trailhead, follow the 0.3-mile access path to the Little Elden Trail, which doubles as part of the Arizona Trail Passage 32. The route heads right (west) at the sign and begins with a shady walk among pines and firs with a smattering of aspens tucked into clearings. Where the trail crosses drainages, plots of rich green ferns swaying over the narrow footpath gently brush the shoulders of passing hikers. Roughly 0.8 mile in, reminders of the 2010 Schultz Fire begin to appear in the form of charred logs and gangly snags.

Soon, the devastating effects of the human-caused blaze that burned 15,075 acres over 10 days and also caused massive, monsoon-driven erosion, come into full view. Although only a short section of the trail passes directly through the fire scar, evidence of its havoc on the landscape is clearly seen in the surrounding hills. The formerly dense pine-oak forests that defined the trail's mid-section were toasted down to ash.

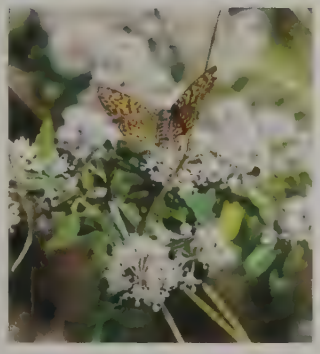
Years removed from the fire, this section is now a sprawling meadow flush with wildflowers and brambles that have taken root among blackened, matchstick-like stumps. The loss of the tree cover has revealed previously obscured views of O'Leary Peak and Sunset Crater to the northeast and the scorched edge of the Kachina Peaks Wilderness to the northwest. The recovering meadows of hip-high grasses foster a botanical garden of blooming plants and shrubs.

Look for fruity raspberry shrubs and the frothy, cream-colored blooms and dark fruits of blueberry elder trees that grow sporadically in bright fields. Delicate Western blue flax twines around Fendler's ceanothus bushes and acres of paintbrush, butter and eggs, thistle, mountain parsley, common mullein, lupines, purple locoweed, gooseberry shrubs and other sun-loving varieties splatter vivid colors on the forest floor.

After about a mile of exposed grassland hiking, the trail heads uphill and ducks into moist, canyon-bound woodlands in the drainage areas near Schultz Tank. This beautiful segment features slopes with sprouting aspen saplings as well as ravines cluttered with old-growth conifers draped in moss. The wetter microclimate here supports a whole other type of wildflower habitat. An understory of spreading dogbane, yellow columbine, Richardson's geranium, curly dock, wild roses and fragrant wild geranium grow profusely in damp slivers of space among roots, boulders and gigantic trees.

The Little Elden Trail ends at a signed junction where several classic Dry Lake Hills routes take off in all directions. If you want to create a longer loop hike, check with the forest service before heading out to be sure your selected trails are open for use.

Otherwise, follow the signs 0.2 mile to Schultz Tank, meander around the peak-reflecting pool and popular recreation hub, then return the same way you came.



Fendler's Ceanothus
Blooms: April-October

LENGTH: 5.6 miles out and back

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,320-8,000 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

In Flagstaff, go north on U.S. 89 to Forest Road 556 (Elden Spring Road, just past milepost 429), turn left and continue 2.4 miles to the Little Elden trailhead on the right. The hike begins at the trailhead kiosk.

MARS HILL TRAIL

Flagstaff Urban Trail System

LENGTH: 1.9 miles one way (or 2.4 miles one way from the community center)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,933-7,402 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restrooms, water at Thorpe Park

DOGS: must be on leash; there's a fenced bark park at the Thorpe complex

GETTING THERE:

Community Center Trailhead:

In Flagstaff, drive north through town on Milton Road to Humphreys Street. Turn left, go north to Birch Street, and continue to where the road dead-ends at the community center/tennis court parking area. Trail is the dirt road straight ahead.

Thorpe Park Complex Trailhead:

In Flagstaff, drive north through town on Milton Road to Humphreys Street. Turn left, go north to Birch Street (Cherry Street works, too), turn left again and continue a few blocks to North Thorpe Road. Turn right and continue a couple blocks to Thorpe Park on the right. Trail begins across from Frances Short Pond/ baseball/dog park complex.

Woodland Pinedrops
Blooms: June-September

Pluto was robbed. Dissed by astronomers, this tiny space orb was recently demoted from regular to dwarf planet status. This seems absurd considering it sports multiple moons and a cartoon character namesake. Pluto was discovered in 1930 using a telescope on Flagstaff's Mars Hill. Today, the site is owned by Lowell Observatory, which has kindly granted an easement for non-motorized recreational use on its scientific preserve.

Mars Hill Trail is maintained by the City of Flagstaff Urban Trails System (FUTS, "foots") and has several access points. The route is wide and smooth, with good views of Flagstaff peaks. Although it passes through Lowell Scientific Preserve, hiking to the observatory from the trail is not allowed. Post-hike, drive to Lowell Observatory and trek from Earth to Pluto – albeit in miniature – by following a 350-foot, outdoor interpretive trail.

MORMON LAKE LODGE AREA TRAILS

Coconino National Forest

Hiding across the street from the horse corral at the busy recreational hub surrounding Mormon Lake Lodge is a sweet little trail that's packed with interest. If you can get past the multiple distractions near the trailhead (the horses, the cowboys, the saloon, the lake views, the aroma of mesquite), a hike up Navajo Spring Trail offers respite from the commotion, and connectivity with the Mormon Lake Lodge Area Recreational Trails (MLL) and the state-spanning Arizona Trail.

The hike begins as an easy stroll through meadows and ponderosa pines. As the trail ascends along a ridge above a drainage, the woodlands get thicker and the chirping squirrels more profuse before it enters a clearing where wire fencing protects aspen seedings from marauding wildlife. Here, just downhill from a prolific spring area, reliable moisture fosters a bevy of wildflowers. Fields of wild bergamot, Mexican silene, wild geranium and red cinquefoil bloom bright in a boot-brushing color mania. Beyond the aspens, a conga line of concrete water troughs arc around the green pastures of Navajo Spring.

This is a good turnaround spot for an easy day hike. For a longer trek, the Arizona Trail and the MLL system are yards away. Mormon Lake Lodge offers a free trail map for resort guests that shows the layout of roughly 13 miles of linked routes.

Here's one loop to try: Follow Navajo Springs Trail 1.1 miles to the AZT junction, turn right (north) and continue 1.6 miles to Forest Road 90N (not signed, but it's the first big road intersection). Head right (northeast) on FR 90N and hike 0.4 miles to the Fakowie Trail (Forest Road 90J), turn right and hike 1.7 miles back to the trailhead following the "lodge" directional signs.

Wild Bergamot
Blooms: July-August

LENGTH: 2.2-mile up and back or 4.8-mile loop

RATING: easy

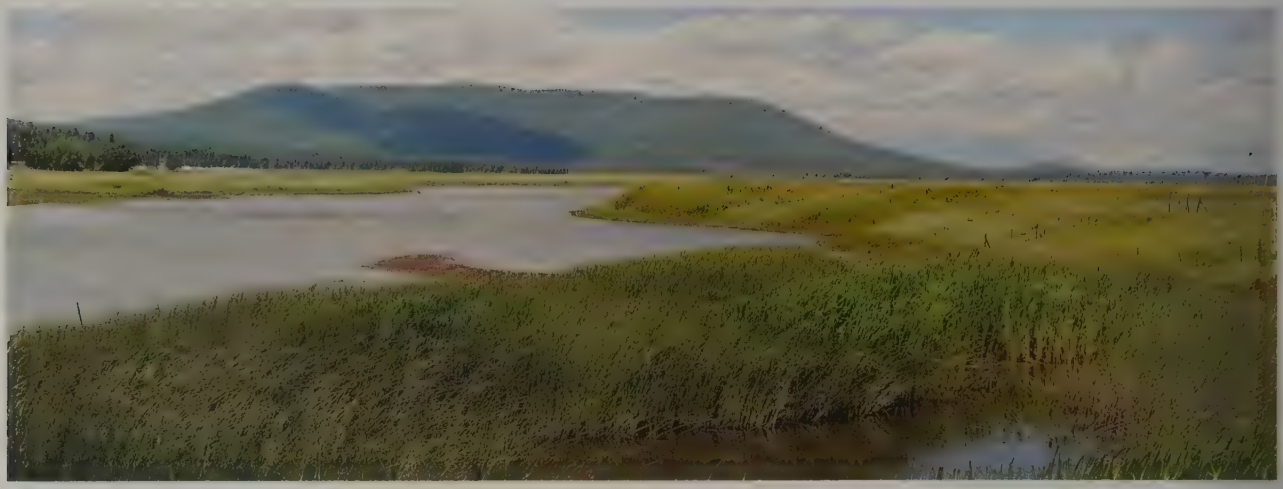
ELEVATION: 6,880-7,550 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: full services at area businesses

GETTING THERE:

From the State Routes 87/260 junction in Payson, continue 37 miles north on SR 87 to Lake Mary Road (County Road 3) located just past the village of Clint's Well. Turn left, go 27 miles on CR 3, turn left onto Mormon Lake Road (Forest Road 90) and drive 2 miles to Mormon Lake Lodge. Park in the dirt lot behind the reservation office and horse corral. Hike begins at the Environmental Education Center across the road.



Lemmon's Star
Blooms: May-August

MORMON MOUNTAIN

Coconino National Forest

Often starring as background characters in horror flicks, bats have been portrayed as rabid harbingers of doom, when all they really want to do is eat bugs and sleep. The much-maligned flying mammals are far from villains, and in Arizona, they are an essential component of forest health.

Nowhere is this more apparent than on the slopes of Mormon Mountain, the smallest "major volcano" in the Flagstaff area. The Mormon Mountain Trail 58 ascends through a thick, old-growth forest of mixed conifers, oaks and aspens. Dead trees known as "snags" act as "bat condos" where layers of peeling bark make convenient belfries (roosts). Rarely harmful to humans, bats actually make a walk in the forest safer and more comfortable. They have voracious appetites for insects, including pesky mosquitoes.

In addition to the bat show, this pleasantly shaded route is loaded with active wildlife including turkey, elk, bear and myriad wild birds. The trail ends in a sunny clearing near the crest of the mountain, where it connects with Forest Road 648 for the final climb to the 8,500-foot summit. Although it has been heavily logged and houses a couple of radio towers, the pinnacle features sweeping views of boggy Mormon Lake and the San Francisco Peaks.

LENGTH: 6 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,200-8,449 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: restrooms and water in the campground

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 20 miles south on Lake Mary Road (Forest Road 3) to Mormon Lake Road (Forest Road 90). Turn right, go 3.6 miles to the Dairy Springs Campground and follow the dirt road 0.3 mile to the signed trailhead.

LENGTH:

Mud Tank Trail: 1.6 miles roundtrip

Brad's Trail: 2 miles round trip

Frog Tank Loop: 3.1 miles

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 6,500-6,700 feet

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

Iron Springs Trailhead:

From Interstate 17 in Munds Park, take the Pinewood Boulevard (Forest Road 240) exit 322 and continue 0.8 mile to Crestline Road. Turn left and go 0.8 mile (road will turn into Oak Drive) to Iron Springs Road, turn right and go 0.2 mile to the trailhead gate. Park along the street, pass through the gate and hike 0.3 mile to the big trailhead kiosk.

MUNDS PARK TRAIL SYSTEM

Coconino National Forest

Just off Interstate 17 a few miles south of Flagstaff, a mix of Coconino National Forest roads and footpaths have been adopted by the Munds Park Trail Stewards – a non-profit organization that maintains and builds recreational routes around the mountain community. The Munds Park Trail System offers a varied menu of both ATV and hiker options enhanced with a plethora of eye candy and points of interest. The Iron Springs Trailhead serves as the system's nerve center, with a map kiosk showing an overview of the entire matrix as well as providing a launch point for the Mud Tank Trail, Brad's Trail and Frog Tank Loop.

A good way to get warmed up before exploring the system's longer routes is to step out on the Mud Tank Trail. This effortless walk among ponderosa pines is open to hikers, bikers and equestrians and culminates at a stock pond. The watering hole is a quiet, pretty place surrounded by oak trees and a muddy fringe of animal footprints. A stroll along its perimeter reveals the signatures of elk, deer, raccoons, birds and the familiar impressions of dog paws. You'll want to hang out for a while to absorb the songs of Mountain bluebirds and Steller's jays on pine-infused breezes before heading back to the trailhead to pick up Brad's Trail.

Named for forest service volunteer Brad Bunsell (1958-2011) who, according to a tribute at the kiosk, never met a rock he couldn't move, the path serves as a non-motorized connector to the Frog Tank Loop. The mile-long trail is also the main artery for paths that access private communities. Look for directional signage tacked to trees to stay on course. The Frog Tank Loop junction marks the beginning of a delightfully irregular, 3.1-mile trip through thick, coniferous forests, sunny meadows and scenic water features. Heading right from the junction, the route descends on a rugged shared-use road to meet the distressed channel of an intermittent stream.

Keep an eye out for motorized traffic while ogling the eroded banks, reflecting pools and trickling rivulets. The loop connects to a maze of forest roads that can cause confusion if you're not paying attention. Just look for the Frog Tank Loop signs at each intersection and you'll be fine. As the trail swings westward, it emerges into a moist, green pasture that drains into Frog Tank. Only foot traffic is allowed around the pool's sensitive berms, so travel lightly or, better yet, take a break beneath one of the massive trees on the perimeter and try to spot some of the animals that come there to drink and swim.

Beyond the tank, the trail crosses a canyon-bound waterway cluttered with high-country wildflowers like pine thermopsis and wild roses before heading uphill to a point just above the steep-walled passage. At the top of the climb, look for a couple of spur paths leading to the lip of the gorge. Carefully peer over the edge for dizzying glimpses of vertical basalt walls and a log-jammed creek. Around the next bend, community paths and cabin rooftops signal the end of the loop, where you'll backtrack on Brad's Trail to the start point.

OLD CAVES CRATER

Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff

Talk about a room with a view! Imagine waking up in a cave atop an extinct volcano and seeing a 12,000-foot massif to the west and endless prairies to the east. That's what the Sinagua people enjoyed from a summit abode on a half-moon-shaped cinder cone east of Flagstaff.

Now known as Old Caves Crater, the pueblo originally had as many as 80 rooms. Exactly how the encampment was used and why it was abandoned in the early 14th century remains a mystery, but an intriguing collection of crumbling foundations and shallow rock shelters provide fodder for the imagination. This cinder cone is unusual, because unlike typical volcanoes of this type, its lava flow happened on the summit instead of at the base. After upside down eruptions splattered thick heaps of molten rock over the mountain top, "geological hiccups" of steaming gasses escaping from the gooey blobs created the maze of grottos and tunnels that are now the highlight of a popular hiking destination.

A 7-mile system of trails explores the arcaheological site and the Fort Valley Experimental Forest that surrounds the mountain. From either of the two trailheads, follow the wide, black cinder road to connect with the 1.4-mile summit ridge trail. The moderate, pine-shaded single track climbs 510 feet to the caves. On the way up, vegetation morphs from pine-juniper forests into sparse, windswept patches of cliff rose and shrubs.

You'll want to stay alert while exploring to avoid trampling fragile artifacts or falling into one of the caverns. As with all heritage sites, leave only footprints and take only photos. Do not attempt to reconstruct walls or "fix" anything. The trails are laid out in a double loop format bisected by the summit route. Map signs at the trailheads clearly show the layout, making it easy to customize the length of your trek.

LENGTH: up to 7 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,660-7,170 feet

BST SEASON: April-November

GETTING THERE:

Dump Road (north) Trailhead:

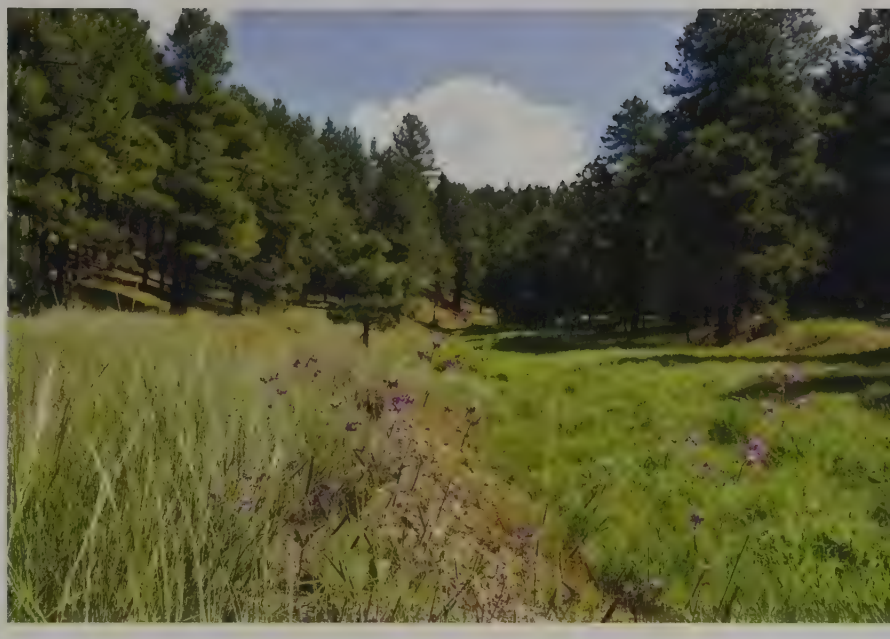
From Flagstaff, go east on Interstate 40 to exit 201 for U.S. Route 89 North. Continue 5.6 miles north to Cinder Lake Landfill Road (FR 6010) marked only by a "Landfill" sign north of mile marker 423. Turn right and go 0.7 miles to the trailhead.

Silver Saddle (south) Trailhead:

From Flagstaff Mall on U.S. Route 89, go 3.5 miles north to Silver Saddle Road, turn right and continue 0.5 mile to the trailhead on the left past milepost 422.

PUMPHOUSE WASH TRAIL

Coconino National Forest, Kachina Village



Pumphouse Wash is a tributary gorge of Oak Creek Canyon that runs between Sedona and Flagstaff, roughly paralleling State Route 89A. Its rugged lower channels – which can be accessed from SR 89A just south of the switchbacks 12 miles north of Sedona – are popular destinations for backcountry hiking and technical canyoneering.

From the looks of the tangled corridor's boulder-choked base, vertical walls, slots and pools of dubious depths, it's difficult to imagine that its headwaters are located 600 feet uphill in unassuming meadows around the tiny community of Kachina Village. Located 9 miles south of Flagstaff off Interstate 17, the mountain hamlet is an idyllic residential area of log cabins, A-frame summer homes and a hub of nature trails in the Pumphouse Wash County Natural Area.

Less than a mile from the freeway, Raymond Park and Pumphouse Nature Trail offer short, effortless walks outfitted with observation decks overlooking acres of wet meadows that help with natural flood control and groundwater recharge, while providing rich wildlife habitat. Just steps off the pavement, these two easy-access sites provide excellent opportunities to view elk, foxes, waterfowl and deer. For a longer hike, farther away from the asphalt and parking lots, the Pumphouse Wash Trail dives deeper into the woods, following damp swales that drain into Oak Creek and the Verde River.

This venture into the softer side of the wash doesn't challenge hikers with harsh terrain navigation, rock scrambling or water obstacles. Instead, the smooth, designated trail that traces vivid strips of sensitive wetlands is all about low-impact travel. The last thing delicate riparian plants and aquatic species need is human boots and loose dogs trampling their precious environments. The Coconino County Parks & Recreation Department, which oversees the site, advises visitors to "hike on the brown, stay out of the green." Sticking to designated trails is always a good idea, but staying out of the weeds is especially important to help protect the health of rare watershed areas like this one.

From the roomy trailhead, the route departs in two directions. The 0.3-mile north segment follows a closed road above a scenic marsh area, but it's the 1.4-mile south leg that leads to the best parts.

Just beyond the rustic fence entry, a sunny field flanked with limestone cliffs glows with summer wildflowers. Showy sunflowers, blue flax and fleabane bloom among tall grasses and fruit-laden wild rose and currant shrubs. The trail stays on the pine-shaded high banks of wide greenway as it twists past scoured embankments and spongy cienegas with water-loving patches of New Mexican checkermallow, shrubby cinquefoil and moth mullein. At about the 1-mile point, the corridor begins to narrow, and willows and oaks gradually close in on the path. The route ends where the meadows morph into a jumbled, overgrown watercourse where Woody Wash comes in from the northwest. Underbrush, log jams and brambles preclude further exploration.

If you need further incentive to hike on the brown and return the way you came, most of the green stuff ahead is poison ivy.

LENGTH: 3.4 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,670-6,600 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

DOGS: must be on leash

GETTING THERE:

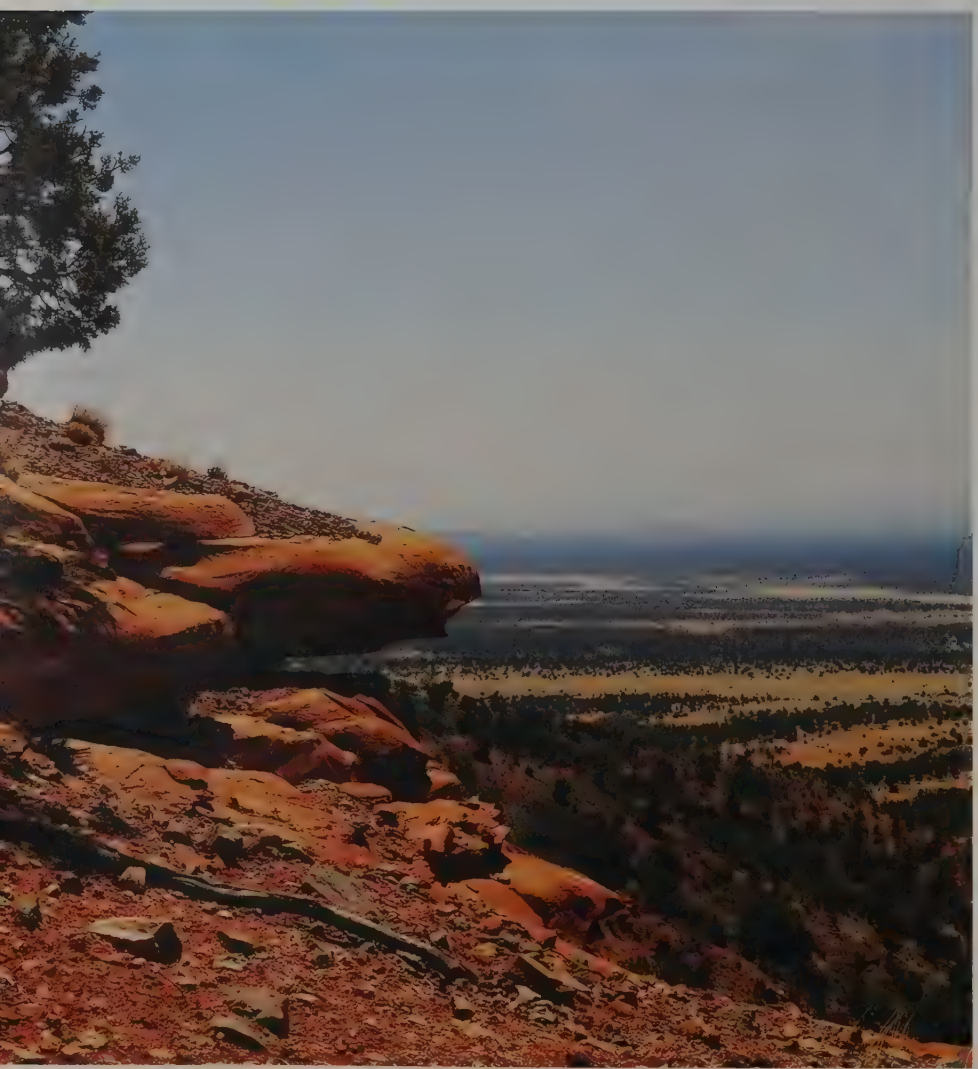
From Interstate 17 just south of Flagstaff, take the Kachina Village exit 333. At the bottom of the off ramp, turn left onto Kachina. Go 0.1 mile to Kachina Trail. Turn right, go 0.3 mile. Turn left onto Ancient Trail, go 0.9 mile to the trailhead on the left across from Oraibi Ovi.

RED BUTTE

Kaibab National Forest, Valle

Impossible to miss along State Route 64, 20 miles south of the Grand Canyon, the russet stone pinnacle known as Red Butte commands the landscape. Rising 866 feet above the flatlands of the Colorado Plateau, this geological wonder is comprised of ancient layers of sand, ocean deposits and river rubble with a layer of inky basalt. Over the past 270 million years, the forces of nature have whittled away much of the rock, but the basalt cap preserved this sugarloaf-shaped cross section of earth history for us to climb.

A clean trail ascends the west face in gradually steepening switchbacks with excellent views all the way up. On the summit, footpaths wander among scenic viewpoints, forest service relics, survey markers (see if you can locate all eight of them) and a lookout tower that is staffed during fire season. To the north, a primitive airstrip stretches across juniper and sagebrush plains with hazy views of the Grand Canyon on the horizon, while the silhouettes of the San Francisco Peaks and Bill Williams Mountain are visible to the south.



LENGTH: 2.5 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,460-7,426 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go north on U.S. 180 to the State Route 64 junction in Valle. Turn north (right) and continue 11 miles to Forest Road 320 at milepost 224. Turn right and go 1.3 miles to Forest Road 340, turn left and drive 0.9 mile to Forest Road 340A, turn right and continue 0.3 mile to the trailhead. Dirt roads are sedan-friendly and well-signed.

Summit Marker

RED MOUNTAIN

Coconino National Forest

Few things in life are certain but what we know for sure is; wet dogs stink, *Star Trek* is great, some hikers think beer is the fifth food group and Red Mountain is one of the most magical places on earth. OK, those first three might be dubious, but the last one – an atypical volcano north of Flagstaff – offers a singular hike that supports the claim.

If you're looking for a mind-boggling, surreal experience, forget theme park attractions – Red Mountain is the real deal. Located just off Highway 180 north of Flagstaff, the 740,000-year-old cinder cone offers a rare opportunity to walk inside the guts of a formerly explosive geological wonder. Although the mountain's fractured and fabulous form is a sight to behold, geologists aren't certain about what caused its northeast face to slump away, exposing the internal structure. Thousands of years of wind and water erosion have sculpted the mountain's multicolored layers of volcanic ash and cinders into craggy pillars and honeycomb walls. Along the short, family-friendly access trail that winds through a pinion-juniper forest, views of the gaping U-shaped collapse give a taste of what's to come.

At the 1.24-mile point, the trail meets the inky black cinder slopes at the base of the volcano, where a wooden ladder must be climbed to get to the good stuff. Inside the volcano, hikers are surrounded by 800-foot escarpments, stony passages and contorted rock columns called hoodoos. Footpaths wander among weather-blasted pinnacles, crevasses, and pine trees and shrubs that took root in the cracks.

There's even a short trek through a tight passage where ongoing erosion washes out bits of shiny black hornblende minerals (often mistaken for obsidian) that collect in glinting streams underfoot. Look overhead to see chock stones (boulders caught in cracks) and lava caps that teeter atop grainy spires like fancy hats. Be sure to bring a fully charged camera or phone to document the adventure in case you're asked to prove what you know for sure about this Arizona natural treasure.

LENGTH: 3 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,700-7,000 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 30.5 miles north on U.S. 180 and turn left at the sign for Red Mountain Trailhead near milepost 247. Dirt access road is passable by passenger vehicles when dry.

ROGERS LAKE COUNTY NATURAL AREA

Flagstaff

Located 10 miles south of Flagstaff, Rogers Lake County Natural Area is a 2,250-acre, high-elevation wetland within the Colorado Plateau Region. Since its acquisition in 2010 by Coconino County, the site is being managed for the protection of wildlife habitat, preservation of rare native plants, environmental education and scientific research while allowing for low-impact, non-motorized recreation.

The Gold Digger Trail is a 4-mile, single-track path that makes a rocky climb on the foothills around Woody Ridge Wildlife Corridor. The 2-Spot Trail, which makes a 2-mile loop near the edge of the ephemeral wetlands, is anchored by a wildlife viewing platform. As sustainability is a core objective for the site, recycled engineer mix and asphalt from ADOT and Flagstaff construction projects are being used to build the trails and parking areas. Another example of this goal appears halfway up the Gold Digger Trail in the form of a shade ramada and picnic table made of repurposed timber and a roof that harvests rainwater for birds. Although the route is obvious to the experienced hiker's eye, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, the trail is 100 percent single track. Where the route meets forest roads, it crosses them – you are never hiking on roads. Next, where wildflowers grow into the path, stop and scope out the trail ahead – you'll see it. And finally, at the ramada, the trail picks up south of the structure, to the left of the road.

While hiking here, you'll enjoy cool pine-oak woodlands with magnificent views and ample opportunity to view wildlife. Please be respectful of this sensitive terrain. Travel quietly, leave no trace and obey all posted regulations.

LENGTH: 5.1-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,878-7,650 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

HOURS: day use only, no camping

DOGS: must be on leash

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 1.9 miles west on Route 66 to Woody Mountain Road (Forest Road 231), turn left and continue 6.5 miles south to the big Rogers Lake County Natural Area sign. Continue 1.3 miles past the sign to the trailhead. Parking lot is on the right (west) side of the road, and the trail begins at the green gate on the left (east) side. From the trailhead, hike roughly 50 yards to where three metal posts mark the loop junction. Go right for Gold Digger. At the 4-mile point, go left at a post to complete the hike on the east leg of the 2-Spot Loop Trail.

An additional trailhead located 0.4 mile past the Rogers Lake sign provides access to the 2-Spot Trail. Woody Mountain Road is washboard-rough but passable by sedan.

SADDLE MOUNTAIN

Coconino National Forest

Trails like this one don't get the respect they deserve. In the grand promised land of Flagstaff-area hiking, it's easy to understand why a perfectly decent destination like Saddle Mountain would get lost in the fuss of showy trails .

Visible from U.S. 180 just north of the Kendrick wildlife viewing area, the extinct cinder cone volcano rises 700 feet above woodlands recovering from the 2000 Pumpkin and 1996 Hochderffer fires. In fact, several hiking books and online sources focus so much on the wildfires when describing this trail that they fail to fully respect its headliner attraction: fabulous views. Thus, its B-list status persists. Certainly, unfortunate proximity to much more impressive mountain hikes (Kendrick Peak, Humphreys Peak) doesn't help visitation, either. Get over it and hike this trail.

The trek itself is a moderate trudge on a service road that twists up the hill like a candy cane, revealing 360-degree landscape vistas that stretch all the way to the Grand Canyon and Painted Desert. To the north, geological landmarks Red Mountain and Red Butte stand out on the flat plains of the Colorado Plateau while massive San Francisco Mountain commands the southern flank. On the summit, a visual spectacle of eroding cinder cones can be seen in Northern Arizona's volcanic field while communication transmitters hum in sync with alpine breezes.

LENGTH: 5.8 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 8,100-8,800

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 21 miles north on U.S. 180 to Forest Road 514 located at milepost 236.5. Set your odometer, turn right and travel 2.5 miles east on FR 514 (stay straight, ignore all side roads) to FR 550, turn left (north) and drive 1.9 miles to where there's a small loop turnaround road on the left. This is FR 550A, but it's not signed. The road climbing the mountain on the left is the trail. Park anywhere along the road, or there's a small (one-car) dirt turn-out roughly 0.2 mile up FR 550A if you want to shorten the hike.

SKUNK CANYON

Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff

LENGTH: 5.2 miles round trip (8.8 miles round trip to Fisher Point)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,720-6,920 feet (7,033 feet to Fisher Point)

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 2.1 miles south Lake Mary Road (Forest Road 3) to S J Diamond Road on the left. Follow this good dirt road roughly 0.2 mile to the end ,where there's a small parking area and gate. Generic forest service and game and fish signs are posted, but nothing indicating Skunk Canyon – no worries, though, you're in the right place.

Squeezed into near obscurity by its proximity to popular Sandys Canyon, this closed road/footpath offers an under-the-radar trek through sun-drenched meadows and a shady slot canyon.

From the trailhead, hike out into a wide field following a double-track Jeep route that's now off limits to motorized travel. After roughly 0.25 mile, the track meets a crossroad. Turn right and walk toward a tall white pole with a solar panel about 0.1 mile up the canyon and let the wildflower frenzy begin. In late summer, the trail is swaddled in shoulder-high sunflowers, lupine, primrose, vetch, fleabane and countless other blooming plants.

Near the 2-mile point, the trail dips into a narrow, damp ravine hemmed in by moss-embellished limestone escarpments with shallow caves and thick coniferous woodlands. Along this brief fir-shaded segment, displays of mushrooms, berries and sparking crystals embedded in trailside boulders make for interesting stop-and-see moments. Once through the dark forest, the path emerges onto yet another open meadow and continues a short distance to the "Y" junction with the Arizona Trail. From here, the hike can be extended by heading either left to connect with the Flagstaff Urban Trail System (FUTS) or, better yet, go right another 1.8 miles to Fisher Point, a scenic overlook above Sandys Canyon.

Western Blue Flax
Blooms: April-September

SLATE MOUNTAIN

Coconino National Forest

There are a couple of curious things about Slate Mountain. First, there's no slate, and second, the mountain is much bigger than it appears. Part laccolith, a mushroom-shaped blob of magma that formed underground, and part explosive volcano, the 8,215-foot mountain measures only 853 feet from its base to summit, but geologists estimate that the lava dome that makes up the mountain extends 5,000 feet below the surface. So, all things considered, Slate Mountain is a considerable beast.

The complicated hill is composed mostly of a pinkish-gray igneous rock called rhyolite, which is exposed along its flanks. The "slate" misnomer comes from the flaky appearance of some of the sedimentary and igneous rocks that were contorted during the mountain's eruptive phase that occurred between 1.5 and 1.9 million years ago. True slate is a metamorphic stone not found in the area.

The trail that climbs to the summit of this unassuming little mound north of Flagstaff doles out gratifying treats at a leisurely, constant pace. One of the first points of interest visible from the trail is the scar from the June 2017 Boundary Fire that swept up 10,418-foot Kendrick Peak. The lightning-caused blaze burned more than 17,000 acres, stopping just short of the Slate Mountain trailhead.

Near the top, the trail makes a sharp swing around the high point for a 360-degree visual smorgasbord. To the north, the San Francisco Volcanic Field rolls out over colorful plains dotted with hundreds of cinder cones and eroding craters. This arc of volcanism stretches from Williams to the area around Sunset Crater. Geologists say this hot spot is still active and predict the next eruption will occur near the Little Colorado River.

It could be years, decades or even centuries before the next magma breaks the surface. Until then, the summit of Slate Mountain is a great place to contemplate the emergence of a new volcano amidst the quiet beauty of the Painted Desert, the splendor of the South Rim of the Grand Canyon and the hazy silhouettes of the Hopi Buttes.

LENGTH: 5 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,360-8,215 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go 26 miles north on U.S. 180 to Forest Road 191 located just past milepost 242.

Turn left and continue 1.9 miles to the signed junction for Slate Mountain, turn right and go 0.3 mile to the trailhead. Forest roads are rough dirt and gravel. High-clearance vehicles recommended. May be impassable in wet conditions.

SPRING VALLEY CROSS-COUNTRY SKI TRAILS

Kaibab National Forest

By the time the Sitgreaves Complex Fire swept through the woodlands north of Parks, it was 98 years overdue. Nearly a century of unbridled vegetation growth coupled with drought years had created tinderbox conditions, and the forest was ready for a good cleansing. When a lightning strike near Sitgreaves Mountain on July 13, 2014, ignited layers of forest litter, fire managers used the incident to effectively treat 11,080 acres of unhealthy land. All but 53 acres of the blaze burned at low to moderate levels of severity, creeping along the ground, taking out brush and small trees, thus reducing the likelihood of future devastating fires. What was left behind is conditions that benefit wildlife habitats and promote forest resources.

Small-Leaf Pussytoes
Blooms: May-August

The site is being rehabilitated and can be explored via the Spring Valley Cross-Country Ski Trails that pass near and through the footprints of both this event and the 2010 Eagle Rock Fire. Roughly a third of the 8-mile RS Hill and Eagle Rock Loop system has been impacted by fire. The trailhead is intact, as are the first couple of miles, but halfway through the Eagle Rock leg, the trail enters the first of a mosaic of burn sites. As would be expected, heavy damage to the trails requires stepping over snags and dodging scoured gullies. New signs clearly mark the route. Hiking here involves leap-frogging from marker to post to tree blaze, so be sure to sight the next sign before proceeding. In between the charred patches, pine seedlings have been planted and fences installed to protect aspen sprouts from browsing elk. Two beautiful stock tanks, plus views of Kendrick Mountain, the San Francisco Peaks and the moist, green fields of Spring Valley, augment this trip through the genesis of a healthier high country forest.

LENGTH: 8 miles, per the Forest Service map

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 7,160-7,893 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From the Interstate 17/40 junction in Flagstaff, travel 15 miles west on I-40 to the Parks exit 178. Go 0.2 mile, turn right at a stop sign and continue 0.2 miles to a second stop sign on Old Route 66. Turn left, drive 0.6 mile to Spring Valley Road (County Road 141), turn right and go 5.5 miles to the trailhead on the left signed for Sanderson Pass Road and Forest Road 787B. Roads are paved and sedan-friendly cinder.

STAGE STATION LOOP

Kaibab National Forest, Williams

Sunflower
Blooms: Summer

Long before the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad, Route 66 and, ultimately, Interstate 40 drastically altered the travel corridors of Northern Arizona, a maze of backcountry dirt wagon roads south of Williams connected the town with surrounding communities. Although they're no longer used as primary routes, the roads that remain mostly lead to ranches and popular recreational sites.

LENGTH: 8-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,200-6,700 feet

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

From Railroad Road and Fourth Street in downtown Williams, go 6.5 miles south on Fourth Street (Fourth Street will turn into Perkinsville Road/County Road 73) to Forest Road 108. Turn right and go 8.3 miles to the east trailhead or 9.5 miles to the "official" west trailhead.

Forest Roads are good gravel/dirt suitable for passenger vehicles.

Stage Station Loop, a rough 4-by-4 road that spins off the Bill Williams Mountain Loop – a 30-mile scenic drive that's also called Forest Road 108 – gives a taste of what long-distance travel was like back in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Kaibab National Forest calls it a bike route, and its rutted, crooked course tests the skills of Jeep enthusiasts, but the shady trail that follows old Forest Road 41 also makes for a moderately challenging hike with subtle sights that speedier users might miss. Passing among pine-oak woodlands, vivid green seep areas and juniper-dotted meadows splattered with random growths of cacti and agaves, the ever-changing scenery offers glimpses of 9,256-foot Bill Williams Mountain and crusty volcanic outcroppings.

From the main (west) trailhead, the route – which is also known as Cow Tank Road – descends gently for 3.5 miles on an often-muddy, red-earth passage to the loop's midpoint where Grindstone Wash feeds into a beautiful pasture with waterholes. This sunny open area, signed as "Cow Tank," is peppered with dilapidated corrals and acres of rusty barbed wire coiled around rough-cut fence posts. Two large earthen stock tanks that sit amid fields of buffalo bur, sunflowers and tree stumps sustain wildlife and the domestic cattle that roam adjacent rangelands.

About a mile farther up the road, the barely discernable remains of the eponymous stagecoach rest stop that served travelers enduring the bumpy ride between Prescott and Williams is perched at the edge of a gorge where natural stone tanks capture rain water. Rusty cans, bent nails, bits of beat-up metal and piles of fragile, weather-worn planks lie scattered in a clearing among weeds and wildflowers. (Please leave all artifacts as you found them.) Two sets of crumbling, dovetailed timbers hint at what were once corners of a log structure. Other than these faint relics, the footprint of the station has been lost to time. From this point, it's a 2.6-mile uphill trudge back to where the route heads left on FR 108 for the final 1.2-mile walk back to the trailhead.

SUMMIT MOUNTAIN

Kaibab National Forest

LENGTH: 2.2 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

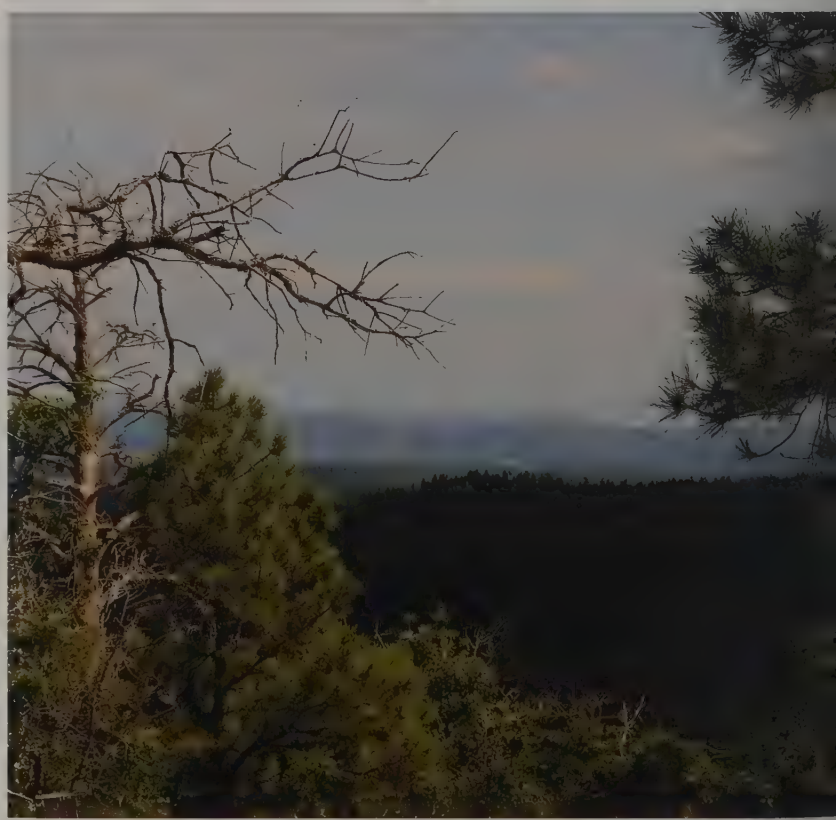
ELEVATION: 7,147-7,797 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

From Flagstaff, travel 27 miles west on Interstate 40 to exit 165. At the bottom of the off-ramp, veer left and follow Railroad Road 2.6 miles through Williams to Fourth Street on the left. Drive 8.3 miles south on Fourth Street (aka Perkinsville Road, County Road 73) to milepost 177 and turn left onto FR 110. Continue 2 miles to the signed turnoff for Summit Mountain Trailhead at Forest Road 2113A on the right. Turn right onto FR 2113A and go 0.5 mile (veer right at the 2111 fork) to the trailhead on the right. Roads are paved, dirt and gravel – all suitable for cautiously driven passenger cars.

Aptly named, Summit Mountain delivers a quintessential peak-conquering experience – but without the pesky sore muscles and taxed lungs. Ascending through thick broadleaf-coniferous woodlands, the trail is a cinch to follow, gaining elevation gradually via long, easy switchbacks. Trees lining the path seem to know when it's time to move aside to reveal sigh-worthy views of the surrounding landscape, treating hikers to a continually changing menu of eye candy.

Near the top, the trail flattens out as it emerges on a windy mesa with two excellent viewpoints. The first is a precipitous shelf of volcanic boulders teetering above the colorful and tumultuous gorge of Sycamore Canyon Wilderness. Here, a mixed bag of raw geological features spills out in a 180-degree arc like the frenzied canvas of a tortured artist. After exhausting your camera batteries (photo ops abound), proceed toward the communication towers and a second (even more precipitous) cliff overlooking a pine-fleeced basin laced with dirt roads and railroad tracks in the shadow of Bill Williams Mountain.



SUNFLOWER FLAT & J.D. CABIN

Kaibab National Forest

Literature is rife with tales of creatures both real and imaginary. Books like J. K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and the 1963 classic *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak introduce readers to magical places and whimsical creatures. These fanciful tales might inspire you to explore the equally enchanting real-life critters and locations of Arizona.

There's an easy way to indulge your curiosity and step back in history along the dirt roads and prairies southeast of Williams. This two-part outing begins at Sunflower Flat Wildlife Area. Situated in a high-country wet meadow surrounded by mountain peaks of Kaibab National Forest, the site is unique in that its condition varies with rainfall, and visiting wildlife responds accordingly. When there's lots of rain, the 160-acre Arizona Game & Fish property is a shallow lake that plays host to myriad waterfowl and shorebirds like ruddy ducks and mallards. As the water wanes, look for cinnamon teals, herons and Northern shovelers poking around in the marsh. Even during the driest times, residual puddles and reflecting ponds draw hawks, elk, pronghorn, black bears and deer, and there are always plenty of frogs, lizards and garter snakes enjoying muddy bogs.

LENGTH:

Sunflower Flat: 3.7 miles

J.D. Cabin: 2.2 miles

RATING: easy

ELEVATION:

Sunflower Flat: 6,620-6,640 feet

J.D. Cabin: 6,640-6,680 feet

GETTING THERE:

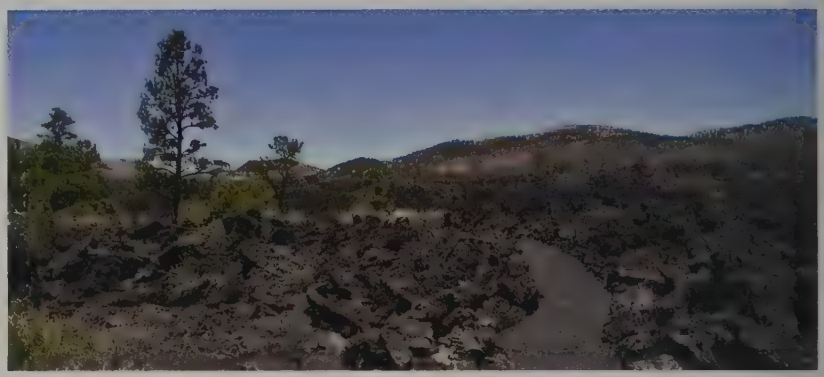
From Flagstaff, go 27 miles west on Interstate 40 to exit 167. Turn right and go 3.8 miles south on Forest Road 141 and veer left at a fork. Continue another 4 miles to FR 109, turn right and go 3.3 miles to FR 14. Turn right and continue 1 mile and turn left on FR 14A. The trailhead is 0.4 miles down this road. Roads are good gravel and passable by passenger car up to FR 14, where high-clearance vehicles are recommended. FR 14A is rough dirt and requires a high-clearance vehicle.

Exploring this ephemeral wetland begins at an information kiosk. Because the objective of this peaceful enclave is to protect and enhance wildlife habitats, please read and respect the trailhead sign that has tips about how to view the local fauna responsibly. Look for areas where tall grasses have been flattened into circular beds. These are animal wallows – places where elk, deer and other beasts sleep and rest.

The hike follows the perimeter fence and takes roughly two hours. The second destination is the J.D. Cabin and gravesite. To get there, hike back up the wildlife area access road, turn left and follow the road 0.7 mile to a turnoff on the right marked "No camping here." This is the historical homestead of James Douglas. An array of rustic buildings with metal roofs and rough-hewn log construction is remarkably well preserved and gives an idea of what life on the prairie must have been like back in the 19th century. A walk around the deteriorating bunkhouse, cabin, corrals and crumbling foundations takes about an hour. Ol' J.D. is buried nearby among soaring pines and wildflower meadows.

SUNSET CRATER: LAVA FLOW TRAIL

Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument, Flagstaff



Volcanoes are one of Earth's most powerful and mesmerizing geological features. Simultaneously beautiful and terrifying, they can hibernate for years before rumbling back to life, spewing fiery ash clouds and fountains of molten rock that create indescribable paths of destruction. Recent eruptions of Hawaii's Kilauea and Guatemala's Fuego volcanoes remind us of the landscape-altering forces inherent in these natural phenomena.

Although Arizona is more commonly associated with saguaro-studded deserts, gaping chasms and red rock formations, much of the state's landscape is a product of volcanism. The San Francisco Volcanic Field north of Flagstaff is home to more than 600 extinct volcanoes that sprawl over the edge of the Colorado Plateau from Williams to the Little Colorado River. Many familiar hiking trails climb to the summits of these ancient and eroded snuffed smokers. Humphreys Peak, Kendrick Peak, Benham and O'Leary Peak are just a few examples.

Views from the tops of these classic trails showcase a landscape dotted with cinder cones, lava domes and expansive lava flows that melt into the colorful flatlands of the Painted Desert and the edge of the Grand Canyon. To complement the impressive highpoint overviews and get a close look at the inner workings of a young volcano, take a hike on the Lava's Edge Trail. The 3.4-mile round-trip trail is one of several within Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument that explore ground-level volcanic features. The moderate-rated route, shoveled out of crunchy cinders and soft black sand, traces a ragged hem of a petrified magma skirt.

Geologists date the eruptive phase of Sunset Crater to between the years 1040 and 1100 AD, which means the volcano's birth was undoubtedly witnessed by the Hopi and Zuni people who lived nearby. The 1,000-foot cinder cone blew ash and debris for miles around before liquid rock oozed from its western base, forming the Bonito Lava Flow. Lava's Edge Trail wanders through the hardened remains of the flow. The free-flowing aa – jagged basaltic lava – cooled into razor-edged slabs, contorted pillars, splatter cones, crusty walls and arched squeezes. The acres of raw, blocky basalt look as fresh as the flows shown spilling from Kilauea.

Over the past 900 years, plant life has struggled to take hold in the steely ground. Still, a stronghold of hearty ponderosa pines, pinions, skunk bush and aspens have taken root in crevasses where water and organic materials provide hospitable conditions along the route. In addition to the otherworldly lava field and its parent 8,039-foot cinder cone, the trail is flanked by two other types of volcanoes. To the north of the trail, the double-humped form of O'Leary Peak (a lava dome volcano) soars to 8,916 feet, while to the west, the bald peaks of San Francisco Mountain (a stratovolcano) top out at 12,633 feet.

To better understand the science behind the trail's many points of interest, stop by the visitor center to view informative videos and displays or take part in a ranger talk. As quiet and peaceful as the dormant volcanic highlands might appear, don't be fooled. The fireworks aren't over yet.

The San Francisco Volcanic Field is still considered to be active, with the next event predicted to happen to the east of Sunset Crater. Whether the earth resumes its fire show in the coming minutes or not for a million years, events in Hawaii have given us a vivid preview of what it might look like.

LENGTH: 3.4 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,920-6,960 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

FACILITIES: restrooms, visitor center

FEE: Park entry fee is good for seven days of exploring within both Sunset Crater Volcano and Wupatki National Monuments. See website for fee schedule, free days and accepted passes.

GETTING THERE:

From the Interstate 17/40 junction in Flagstaff, go east on I-40 east to the U.S. 89 north exit. Continue north on U.S. 89 to the turnoff for Sunset Crater (Forest Road 545), located just past milepost 430. Turn right and follow the signs 2 miles to the park entrance. From the fee station, continue 1.3 miles to the signed trailhead on the left.

VISHNU TRAIL

Kaibab National Forest, Tusayan

Whether hiked as an inspirational appetizer, warm-up walk or add-on trek while exploring around the South Rim of the Grand Canyon near the town of Tusayan, the Vishnu Trail is a quick and easy diversion with tantalizing views and opportunities to engage with the Arizona Trail.

The hike begins directly under the Grandview Lookout Tower, where the well-marked path heads north through wildlife-rich pine-oak woodlands and shrubby enclaves. After roughly a quarter mile, glimpses of the hazy, russet chasm begin to appear through the trees. As the trail progresses to its overlook spur, vistas unwrap like unexpected gifts that surprise and thrill. A metal gate marks the threshold to the best sights of the hike.

Beyond the gate, canyon vistas take center stage, culminating at a boulder ledge above a sea of pinion and ponderosa pines that creeps up to the colorfully layered walls of the canyon. Views of dramatic rock formations, fog-veiled depths and the distant highlands of the Kaibab Plateau tease the imagination and seed ambitions for more canyon hiking. Seasoned Grand Canyon hikers might find these peekaboo vistas underwhelming, but for first-timers or those who appreciate alternate points of view, they are stunning. The prominent cone-shaped formation in the mid-ground is 7,829-foot Vishnu Temple. Named for the Hindu god who protects the universe, the majestic landmark is one of the highest points in the gorge's east end.

But the ooh-ahh photo ops don't end here. To the southeast, an imposing, elongated landform marks the convergence of the Coconino Plateau, the Colorado and Little Colorado Rivers and the pastel flatlands of the Painted Desert. To complete the loop, backtrack to the spur junction and follow the return leg to where it connects with the Arizona Trail and the Dwarf Mistletoe Interpretive Area. Head left here for a short walk outfitted with educational signs that provide information on the invasive parasite, forest health, plants and wildlife. This worthwhile diversion adds just under a mile to the trek.

For a longer option, continue hiking south on the Arizona Trail through thick woodlands of the Kaibab National Forest that hover above expansive desert plains. This 4.7-mile section is also referred to as the Coconino Rim Trail. Replete with scenic viewpoints, the shaded, easy stretch gives a tiny taste of the 800-mile route that runs north-south through the state from Mexico to Utah.

Back at the trailhead, gird your acrophobia and check out the Grandview Lookout. Built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1936, the 80-foot-tall tower capped with a seven-foot-square metal cab soars above the trees at the lip of the canyon. When a forest service worker is on duty and not engaged with a fire incident, visitors are welcome to climb the narrow, creaky stairs for predictably grand views.

LENGTH:

Vishnu Trail: 1.1-mile loop (2 miles with the interpretive trail)

Coconino Rim: 9.7 miles out and back

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 7,400-7,529 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

FACILITIES: vault toilet

GETTING THERE:

From U.S. 64 in Tusayan, turn right on Forest Road 302, just past the traffic circle when entering town from the south. Go 14.1 miles east on FR 302 to Forest Road 310, turn left and continue 1.3 miles to the trailhead at the tower. Forest Roads are good dirt/gravel suitable for passenger vehicles.

WALKER LAKE
Coconino National Forest

Arizona's own crater lake resides quietly within the bowl of a nondescript volcano north of Hart Prairie. From a distance, the pine-speckled hill doesn't appear to be anything special. But a short walk up a closed road reveals a shallow lake filling a vent that spewed lava in its former life. The road makes an easy climb to the lip of the crater, where it transitions into a footpath that follows the fortress-like rim.

The high vantage points offer fantastic views of the San Francisco Peaks, Kendrick Mountain, White Horse Hills and Hochderffer Hills – extinct volcanoes, all. Numerous paths also lead down to the ephemeral lake that, in summer, shrinks to a patchwork of shallow puddles besieged by clouds of colorful dragonflies. The crater forms sort of a wet "meadow in a bowl," fostering a swale of wild field mint, daisies, silverweed and New Mexico vervain as well as herds of thirsty elk that frequent its reliable watering holes.

Field Mint
Blooms: July-September

LENGTH: 1-2 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 8,060-8,189 feet

BEST SEASON: May-October

GETTING THERE:

From Flagstaff, go north on U.S. 180 for 19 miles to the northern exit for Forest Road 151 (Hart Prairie Road) just past milepost 235. Turn right and continue 1.6 miles on the good dirt road to FR 418. Turn left and go 0.2 miles to FR 9007S, turn left and continue 0.2 miles to a roundabout, veer right onto FR 9004S (sign is not obvious) and continue to a circular parking area near where FR 9219T heads right. The trail begins at the "Road Closed and Trail" sign in the northwest end of the parking area. Dirt roads are passable by carefully driven sedans.

Water Smartweed
Blooms: July-September

WALNUT CANYON – SANDYS CANYON

Coconino National Forest

LENGTH: 8 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,580-6,820 feet

BEST SEASON: April-October

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17 in Flagstaff, take the Lake Mary Road exit 339 and go 4.5 miles south to the Sandys Canyon Trailhead turnoff on the left.

Flagstaff's Walnut Canyon, which splits the landscape southeast of town, is the work of an ancient river that carved its way through dolomite-rich limestone and sandstone. The geological wonder is rife with history and recreational opportunities. Think: prehistoric Sinagua dwellings at Walnut Canyon National Monument, that grueling staircase, hikes along the rim and a scenic passage of the Arizona Trail.

As if these attractions weren't enough, there's another place tucked into a tributary at the canyon's western edge that explores its wilder side. To get to this surprisingly green destination, begin on the popular Sandys Canyon Trail, hike 2 miles through the wide, pine-fringed valley to the equestrian bypass post and veer right, heading toward a hub of signs and activity where the Arizona Trail branches into various options for hiking and riding through or around Flagstaff. Just around a bend, first glimpses of the petrified sand dunes that characterize the trail stand out in a massive blob of cross-bedded stone. The appearance of the landmark below Fisher Point can be described as having the shape of *Star Wars* villain Jabba the Hutt and the texture of dinosaur hide.

Because Jabba did his dirty deeds a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, we cannot be sure of when he lived. However, we know for sure that Walnut Canyon's odd geological features are older than the dinosaurs of our own little planet. The sand dunes formed between 299 and 251 million years ago during the Permian Age, when earth's land masses were coalescing into the super continent of Pangaea. This was a period of climate extremes and harsh conditions. This domain of reptiles and other species that would later evolve into mammals ended with a mass extinction of terrestrial and sea species. What happened? Well, theories include climate change due to volcanic eruptions, methane poisoning and asteroid impacts. Death Star, maybe?

Regardless, the fossil remains of that time form the backbone of a fascinating hike. From the sign post hub, hike over to the "Jabba" formation to explore the cave at its base. At the back of the cavern, look for a slot that lets in a sliver of sunlight. After checking out the cave, continue east along an unmarked trail to a sign that marks the beginning of the Walnut Canyon Trail. Beyond the sign, the canyon tapers into a tunnel of trees with an understory of red-osier dogwood and brambles. Canyon walls tower 400 feet on both sides as the thin trail plows through damp aspens, mossy pines and sun-washed meadows.

Two spur paths lead to caves scoured from striated limestone walls. The first is a shallow overhang, while the second is a deep shaft with water seeping from above. Bring a flashlight because it goes back about 25 dark, dank feet. The trail goes on to a point roughly 1.8 miles from the Jabba cave where an overgrown drainage and an impenetrable nursery of aspen saplings deny further passage.

WHITEHORSE LAKE TRAILS

Kaibab National Forest

Due to some very serious competition, the two little trails at Whitehorse Lake don't get the attention they deserve. Located adjacent to several classic hiking destinations on the Kaibab National Forest south of Williams, it's no wonder these lakeside gems live in unheralded obscurity. Although these mini treks are certainly not in the same league as the nearby Sycamore Canyon Rim Trail, Overland Road or the epic routes ascending Bill Williams Mountain, they are ideal for a warm-up leg stretch or educational strolls with kids. Also, they're situated within Whitehorse Lake Campground, which makes the perfect base camp for hitting the famous trails.

Whitehorse Lake 33 begins at a parking area near camp Loop F where there's a map sign and a supply of brochures with descriptions for 12 numbered points of interest along the route. The one-way trail ends at a blocked road gate near camp Loop B. From the "F" trailhead, go left and hike out over a dam built in 1934 to improve wildlife and recreational opportunities in the area.

Follow the posts through pine-oak woodlands, marsh areas and reed-choked coves. Features along the way include water bird habitats, "yellow-belly" ponderosa pines, wildflowers, bird and bear feeding sites and mushroom logs. At post 9, the Canyon Overlook Trail 70 veers off for an optional 2.5-mile round-trip hike to a scenic point over Sycamore Canyon. Both trails have short sections where the route is obscured by deadfall and leaf litter, but finding your way isn't too challenging. Beyond post 12, the trail swings through prime critter country along the southeast shore of the 35-acre lake before ending directly across the water from the start point. Retrace your steps or follow campground roads back to the trailhead.

LENGTH:

Trail 33: 2 miles round trip

Trail 70: 2.5 miles round trip

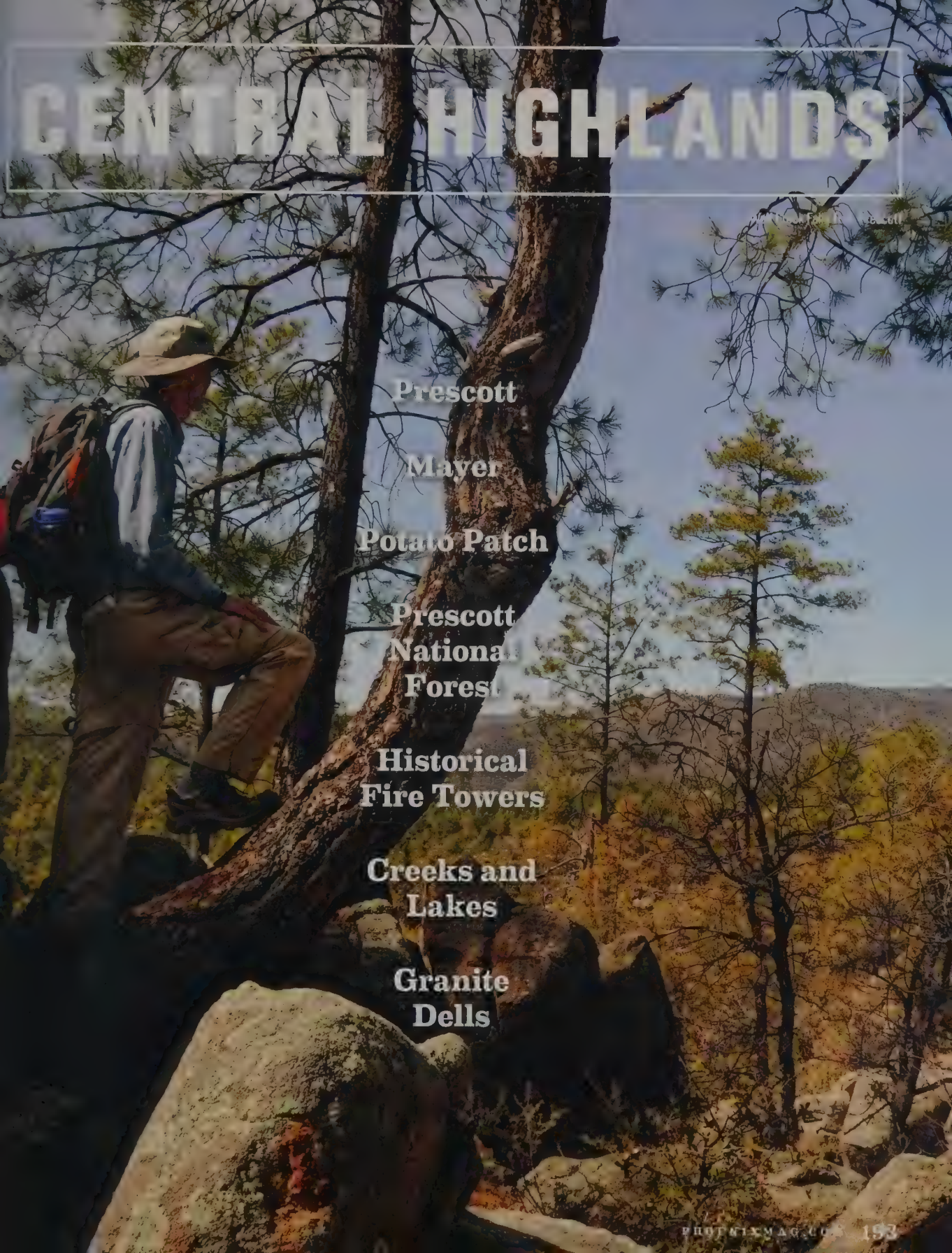
RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 6,600-6,625 feet

FACILITIES: restrooms, camping, fishing (fee)

GETTING THERE:

From Williams, go 8.2 miles south on Fourth Street (turns into Perkinsville Road, County Road 73) to Forest Road 110 at milepost 177. Turn left and go 7.2 miles to FR 109, turn left and continue 3 miles to the lake. Follow the signs to either day use area near Loops B or F. Roads are paved and sedan-friendly dirt/gravel.


CENTRAL HIGHLANDS
Prescott
Mayer
Potato Patch
Prescott National Forest
Historical Fire Towers
Creeks and Lakes
Granite Dells

CLARK SPRING

Granite Basin Recreation Area

LENGTH: 4.4 miles out and back or 6.6-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,620-6,400 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

FEE: $5 daily fee per vehicle. Bring exact change for the self-pay kiosk.

FACILITIES: restroom

GETTING THERE:

From downtown Prescott, go north on Montezuma Street (which turns into Whipple Street and then Iron Springs Road) and continue 4.5 miles to North Granite Basin Road. Turn right and go 3.7 miles to the Metate Trailhead. Roads are paved and there are restrooms at the trailhead.

Sometimes, Clark Spring might be bone-dry. Like many water features in precipitation-challenged Arizona, the ordinarily moist natural fountain that trickles into a sandy drainage in Prescott's Granite Mountain Recreation Area flows sporadically. Although flowing water isn't always a given at the spring, the riparian corridor it feeds along Clark Spring Trail 40 is alive and well.

Even without springtime waterworks permeating the area with lacy rivulets and clear cascades, a hike along this stunningly diverse trail makes for an afternoon of fun and discovery. The scoured, mile-long gully near the spring that hosts a community of willows and cottonwoods is just one part of a multifaceted trip through jumbled terrain just a few miles north of downtown Prescott. Finding the trail is a little tricky.

Begin on Granite Mountain Trail 216 at the Metate Trailhead. Hike 0.25 mile (veer right at an unsigned junction to stay on 216) to the Balancing Rock Trail 349, turn left and continue to the turnoff for Clark Spring Trail 40 and follow the road roughly 20 yards to the trail proper. Here, the route begins a 700-foot ascent, moving out of shady Ponderosa pine forests and onto a sunny ridge cluttered with manzanita, cacti and agave. A smattering of pinion pines and live oaks frame views of Granite Mountain, Flagstaff's San Francisco Peaks and the golden flatlands of Williamson Valley.

Except for a sheer cliff face that mimics Yosemite National Park's Half Dome formation, Granite Mountain looks like it fell off the back of a galaxy-class dump truck. Haphazard mounds of rubble, craggy shelves and balancing spires belie the handiwork of eons of wind and water erosion.

Look carefully and you'll see the sooty scar of the 2013 Doce Fire struggling to heal on the far slopes. Above the distressed granite piles, ospreys and turkey vultures ride the current above nearby Granite Basin Lake. The steep, rocky segment tops out on a flat, where a gateway of spent agave stalks mark the beginning of the descent to the spring area. This beautiful section wanders under oak-pine canopies that throw refreshing shadows on the dry but still lush riparian corridor below. The cooler, usually moister environment is a wildlife magnet, and you're almost guaranteed to spot foraging squirrels, scrub jays and woodpeckers drilling into dead trees for insects. The greenway stroll ends where the trail heads back uphill on long, canyon-hugging switchbacks. Massive boulders, enormous Alligator junipers and the best views of the hike are the key features of the final half mile, which ends at a high pass between Little Granite Mountain and Two Rock Mountain.

For an out-and-back hike, the junction with Little Granite Mountain Trail 37 is the turnaround point. But if you want more miles, take the loop option. A word of caution: The last two legs of the loop are more exposed and pass through fire-damaged terrain. Be sure to bring plenty of water and sun protection if you choose this option. To do the loop, hike 2.8 miles north (go right) on Trail 37 to Blair Pass. Veer right on to Trail 261 and enjoy the final 1.6-mile trek thorough high desert wilderness back to the trailhead.

CONSTELLATION TRAILS

City of Prescott

Some people believe that good luck will ensue if you hold your breath while traveling through a tunnel. There's an opportunity to test this theory at the gateway to Prescott's Constellation Trails. Take a deep breath of clean prairie air and – if you're taller than 5 feet, 4 inches – duck down, head through the State Route 89 underpass and exhale in a weathered world of ancient granite dells at the trailhead on the other side.

Manzanita
Blooms: March-May

The crystal-infused granite dells are a wonder and this web of loop paths takes hikers through a beautifully varied terrain in just under 3 miles. "You are here"-style maps are posted at the trailhead and at every junction throughout the system, making navigation super simple. The most challenging legs are North 40 and Lost Wall, both of which traverse the area's highest, rockiest places. From the bare-rock high points, views of bucolic Williamson Valley frame the distant peaks of Flagstaff and Williams at the edge of Northern Arizona's Colorado Plateau.

The trails move among juniper-shaded glens and exposed slickrock where white paint dots mark the way. A couple of fun squeezes through stone corridors get hikers up close and personal with bizarre patterns infused within igneous rock. Back at the trailhead, there's a commemorative plaque that pays tribute to the Navy crewmen of the Air Force Lockheed C-121G USS Constellation, which crashed here in 1959. A small pile of wreckage sits nearby.

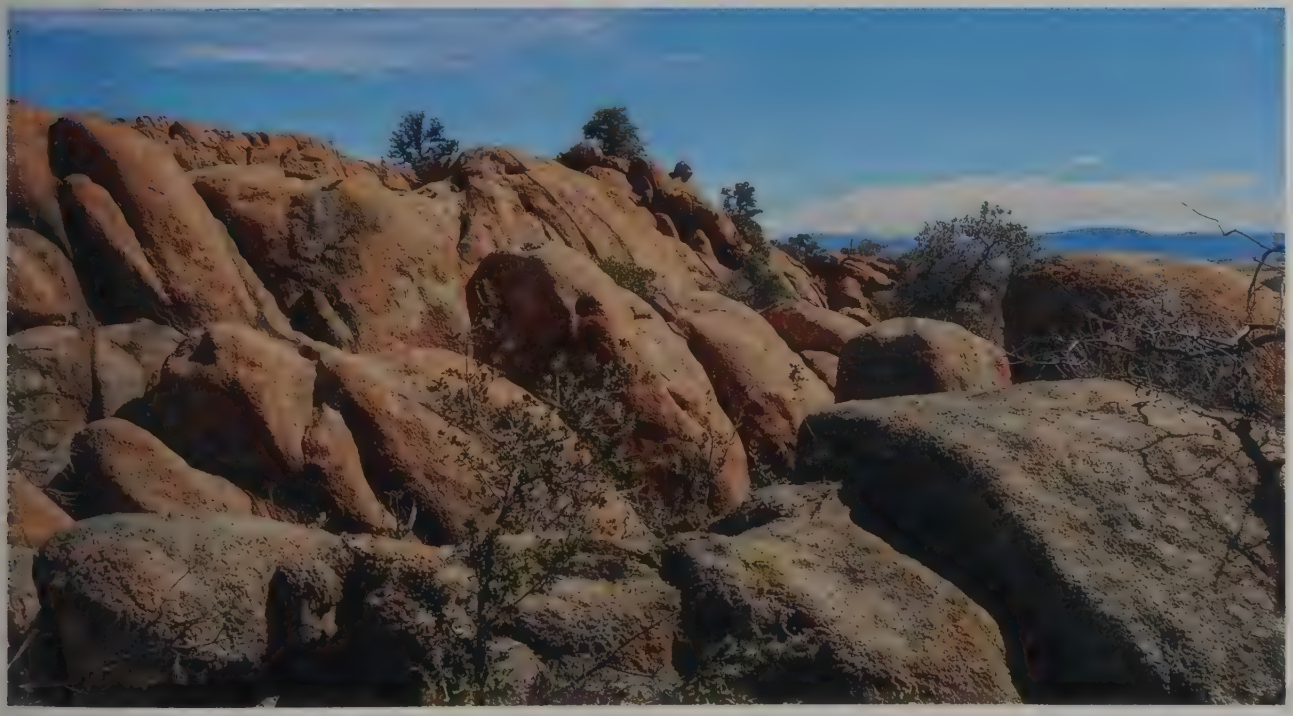
LENGTH: 2.74 miles total

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 5,016-5,229 feet

GETTING THERE:

From the State Routes 69/89 junction in Prescott, go north on SR 89 – past Watson Lake – to just beyond milepost 318 and turn right at the entrance for Phippen Museum. Look for the trailhead parking area – do not use the museum lot. Trail begins at the gate near the highway.



FAIN PARK TRAILS

Town of Prescott Valley

LENGTH: 3.6 miles total

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 4,954-5,133 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

HOURS: 7 a.m.-10 p.m. October-March; 5 a.m.-10 p.m. April-September

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From State Route 69 in Prescott Valley, go 0.1 mile south on Prescott East Highway to Second Street. Turn left. Go 0.1 mile to Fifth Street, turn right and go 0.4 mile to the park.

Tucked into a ravine between industrial parks and subdivisions five miles downstream from Lynx Lake in Prescott Valley, Fain Lake offers a diverse menu of outdoor recreation opportunities. The lake is the centerpiece of a 100-acre park that's named for the Fain family – one of the original settlers in the area – who donated the land to the Town of Prescott Valley in 1997. The tiny oasis located less than a mile off busy State Route 69 provides easy access to fishing, gold panning, picnicking and hiking while embracing its multifaceted heritage and natural resources with educational components. The mineral-rich, creekside property has been explored, hunted, mined and homesteaded since prehistoric times.

The discovery of gold in the nearby Bradshaw Mountains in the mid-1800s brought on a boom of mining activity, and several historic artifacts and buildings from this profitable era are preserved in and around the park. Noteworthy among the many points of interest is a collection of defunct mining equipment on display along the Lynx Creek Loop Trail. Relics including rusty gears, cogs, jacks and a magnificently restored stamp mill – a kind of crushing machine used in the processing of ore – are outfitted with signs that explain their function in the laborious pursuit of extracting gold from rock and water. The hills above the 3-acre lake are outfitted with a convoluted system of loopy trails. Two primary routes – the Lynx Creek Loop and the Cavalry Trail – combine for a 1.6-mile circumference tour, while the Canyon, Chapel, Overlook and Shoreline trails provide scenic detours. The trails wind among scrubby highlands, slender canyons, leafy backwaters behind the lake's dam, calm shorelines, a created waterfall and stony grottos along Lynx Creek.

Although the trails are well-marked, seasonal flooding and washouts can make certain areas inaccessible, but the system's interconnected layout makes it easy to circumvent the sporadic obstacles. The popular community fishing lake is stocked regularly with rainbow trout (except in July and August) by Arizona Game and Fish Department. A fishing dock, bridge, dam observation platform, picnic ramadas, restrooms and a barrier-free lakeside path round out the family-friendly amenities of this compact gem.

GLASSFORD HILL SUMMIT TRAIL

Town of Prescott Valley

There's a little volcano in Prescott Valley that, despite its lack of climate-altering fireworks à la Krakatoa or a festering apocalypse like the one under Yellowstone National Park, still managed to create a big enough impression on the landscape to warrant a hiking trail to its summit.

With its out-of-nowhere character, the new route walks out of the suburbs into the spent inferno of an extinct volcano, culminating on a scenic highpoint in Arizona's Central Highlands. Dedicated in May 2016, the Glassford Hill Summit Trail makes a moderately difficult climb among the crumbling lava flows and eroding slopes of a Miocene-epoch volcano situated at the edge of State Route 69.

When viewed from the highway, the rounded form of Glassford Hill doesn't look that special. With a smattering of subdivisions and shopping centers lapping at its base, the grassy mound humbles in comparison to cloud-brushing Bradshaw Mountain Peaks visible across the valley. However, the hill's back side is quite a different scene. A gaping gash severs the mountain's north face. Between 10 and 14 million years ago, this area was a cauldron of bubbling magma, fiery cinders and molten lava bombs that broke the surface and froze into bizarre pillars and rivers of basalt. Layers of ocher and russet stone are evidence of multiple volcanic events.

The first mile is a moderate stroll through sparse grasslands, weather-beaten junipers and hardy shrubs where resident pronghorn graze. Interpretive signs along this section provide information on local wildlife and geological features. Beyond the 1-mile point, the wide dirt path heads upward, ascending more than 900 feet by way of tight switchbacks. At each turn, the trail becomes steeper, but picnic tables placed at each juncture and mileposts every quarter mile make it easy to take a break and decide if you want to press on or turn back.

Those who reach the summit are rewarded with unobstructed, 360-degree vistas, a display of historic heliograph equipment and more picnic tables. The bald zenith rises over a sprawling valley ringed by mountains. On clear days, the peaks of Flagstaff, Williams and Prescott National Forest gleam on the horizon, while homes and businesses roll out in neat grids below the hill's fractured slopes.

◇

LENGTH: 2.1 miles (4.2 miles roundtrip)

RATING: more difficult

ELEVATION: 5,183-6,123 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

FACILITIES: porta potty

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to exit 263 for State Route 69. Follow SR 69 26.5 miles to Prescott East Highway (just past milepost 289), turn right and continue 0.6 mile to Sunset Lane. Turn left and go 0.1 mile to Castle Drive, turn right and continue 0.3 mile to the parking lot on the left. From the map sign, head right and hike 0.1 mile on the dirt road to the bridge and the beginning of the trail. Roads are 100 percent paved.

GOLDWATER LAKES TRAIL

City of Prescott

The Prescott Circle Trail makes a 54-mile loop tour around the mile-high city using existing hiking trails, bike routes, roads and newly constructed paths.

Swooping through a mixed bag of pine-wrapped mountains, creekside greenery, windy grasslands, municipal parks, national forests and high-country lakes, the route highlights the scenic diversity surrounding Arizona's original capital city. More than a dozen trailheads along major roads make hiking the route in segments or via car shuttle treks a cinch.

False Toadflax
Blooms: April-August

One favorite segment for day hiking in warmer months is The Goldwater Lakes Trail 396. Massive canopies of ponderosa pine, alligator juniper and oak provide cooling shade as the route winds above the lakes and across the boulder-flanked ravine and crisp waters of Bannon Creek. Although the trail proper does not go to the lakes, obvious spur trails will get you there. The trek is anchored by two trailheads, which connect to longer national forest routes and, of course, the rest of the Circle Trail.

LENGTH: 4.7 miles one way

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,630-6,165 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

East Trailhead:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 4 miles south on Senator Highway/Mt. Vernon Avenue, to the Watershed 299 trailhead on the left. Trail 396 begins across the road.

West Trailhead:

Follow directions above, but continue past Mt. Vernon to Montezuma Street (aka White Spar Drive, SR89). Turn left and go 3 miles south to the White Spar Campground on the left.

GRANITE GARDENS

City of Prescott

If this new system of four trails were a dog, it would be a Jack Russell terrier – compact, feisty and righteously entertaining. So, before taking a pass on it due to its short length, consider its attributes.

The bite-sized hike begins on the Stairway Loop with an ascent up 38 steps that land hikers on an overlook above Granite Creek. At the top of the stairs, views of Prescott's Granite Dells area are breathtaking. Here, an overview of what lays ahead nips at your heels. Next up: an exposed meander over slickrock guided by white dots painted on slabs of granite that resemble splayed reptile hide. The route winds up around Castle Rock, then descends to meet the Rock Stacker and Grotto Trails. Both aptly named, these two paths combine for a terrier-grade, energetic swoop through a wilderness of stone with steep climbs, narrow passages and a rib-tickling squeeze through the claustrophobic darkness of the "grotto." Like a speeding carnival ride, this trek is over too quickly, but will have you yelling, "Let's do it again!"

LENGTH: 1.15 miles total

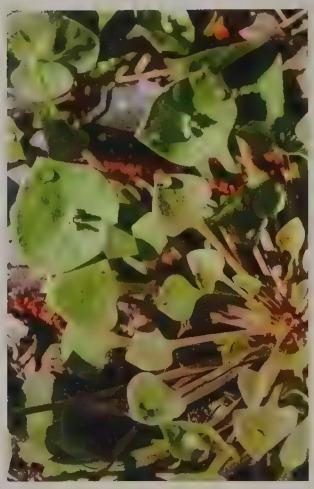
RATING: moderate-difficult

ELEVATION: 5,050-5,150 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 2.1 miles north on Prescott Lakes Parkway, turn right and continue to State Route 89. Turn right and go 2.2 miles to Granite Garden Drive (unsigned), located directly across from Granite Gate Senior Living Community between mileposts 317 and 318. Turn right onto this rough dirt road and continue 0.2 mile to the trailhead on the right just before the creek. Those with low-clearance vehicles may park in the turnoffs before the road gets too rough.



Miner's Lettuce
Blooms: February-May

GRAPEVINE TRAIL

Prescott National Forest

From State Route 69, the high desert grasslands around Big Bug Mesa near the town of Mayer don't look like they're hiding an oasis. But deep within these arid hills, Grapevine Canyon harbors a perennial creek and a sliver of green fed by snowmelt-charged springs. This sensitive site has been designated Grapevine Botanical Area and is open only for day use by hikers and equestrians.

The dirt access road to the trailhead gets rough and narrow after 2 miles, so many hikers prefer to park at the first fork and hike the final 1.5 miles. While the road hike is pleasant, it also saves your vehicle from "Arizona pinstriping" caused by thorny shrubs that arch over the rugged two track. Whether driven or hiked, the road follows the terrain as it makes an amazing and rapid transition from dry scrub and cacti to pine-oak groves. Then, with the jolt and flamboyance of a firecracker display, bang! A verdant Garden of Eden spills from a moist woodland corridor at the trailhead. A forest of alder trees crowd around an information kiosk, and a small Trail 4 sign marks the beginning of the 2.5 mile hike up the canyon.

Although Grapevine Creek goes underground at the trailhead, it resurfaces after a few minutes of hiking. Massive stands of oak, walnut, boxelder and wild canyon grape vines sink their roots deeply into the crystalline water that tumbles over boulders and slickrock chutes. Dozens of waterfalls gush through log jams and columbine-decorated embankments, providing photo opportunities galore as well as a soothing soundtrack. After about a mile of shaded, creekside hiking, the trail begins an aggressive climb along the canyon wall above the creek. This half-mile segment, which winds through exposed cliffs populated with manzanita and cacti, provides excellent views of Prescott Valley and the strikingly divergent riparian gorge below.

On the top of the canyon, the route meets the creek and cool tree cover once again, passing through two gates (presumably to keep cows out) before making several creek crossings and a final ascent to the main source spring at trail's end.

LENGTH: 2.5 miles one way (4 miles one way with road hike)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,750-6,320 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to Cordes Junction exit 262 and head west on State Route 69 (toward Prescott). Continue 11 miles and make a left turn onto Grapevine Road (FS87A) just before milepost 274. There is no sign at the turn, but there's one on the road. Follow the dirt road 2 miles to a fork where there's a parking apron for drivers who want to avoid the rough road ahead. Those with high-clearance or 4-by-4 vehicles can continue down the left fork to a green gate at the 2.7 mile point. Park here if the gate is locked, otherwise, you may drive another 0.6 mile (go straight and then veer right at a fork) to the trailhead. Be prepared for some very rocky obstacles and shrubs that will scratch wide vehicles.

Scarlet Creeper
Blooms: May-Octobe

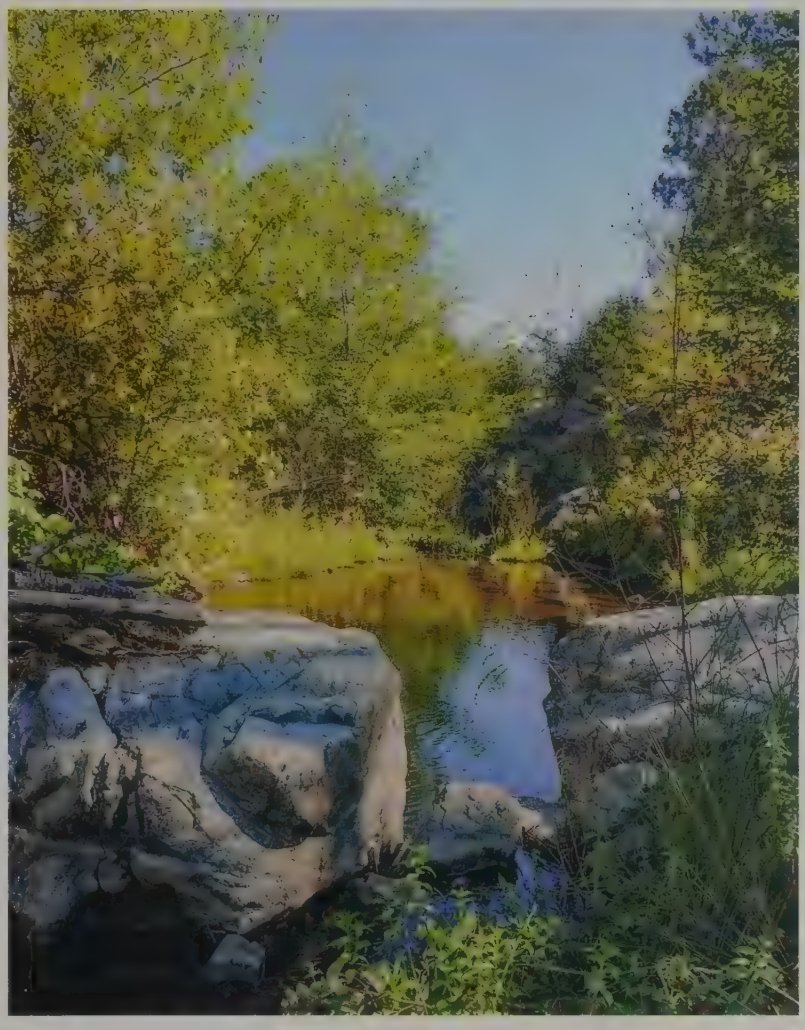
HIGHLANDS CENTER for NATURAL HISTORY TRAILS

Prescott

Located adjacent to the Lynx Lake recreation site a few miles south of downtown Prescott, the trails of the Highland Center for Natural History blend hiking with education.

Two easy trail loops are laid out to highlight the unique geology, plant life, conservation concerns and watershed resources of the Central Arizona Highlands. Field guides available at the trailhead correspond with numbered points of interest along the collective 3 miles of nature trails. These short paths also connect with longer forest trails for those who want more of a challenge.

In addition to being a model of sustainable building practices and fire-wise landscaping, the center offers a plethora of guided field hikes, youth learning opportunities and naturalist certification programs. The keynote event is the annual "Take A Hike" Hiking Spree. Participants in the popular, self-paced event hike a list of designated trails within the Prescott National Forest and City of Prescott systems between September and December. Hikers who complete the program may purchase a commemorative medallion and also are entered into a prize drawing..



LENGTH: 3 miles

RATING: easy, partially barrier-free

ELEVATION: 5,300-5,590 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

HOURS: variable, but generally 8 a.m.-6 p.m.

FEE: none, but donations are appreciated

FACILITIES: visitor center

GETTING THERE:

1375 S. Walker Rd., Prescott:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 1.8 miles south on Walker Road (milepost 293) to the center on the left.

LENGTH:

Double loop (as described here): 8.5 miles

Lakeshore-Johns Tank loop: 4.3 miles

Salida Gulch-Johns Tank loop: 6.2 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,050-5,790 feet

BEST SEASON: April-November; trail closed when bald eagles are nesting

FEE: $5 daily fee per vehicle for Lynx Lake access; bring exact amount for self-serve pay station

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic tables, nearby store at Lynx Lake trailhead; vault toilet at Salida Gulch

GETTING THERE:

Lynx Lake access:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 2.1 miles south on Walker Road (milepost 293). Turn left onto Lynx Lake North Shore (Forest Road 611). Go 0.2 mile to the parking area. Hike down the walkway at the southeast end of the parking area to Lakeshore Trail 311. Follow it along the spillway to Trail 94. Roads are paved.

Salida Gulch access:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 1.2 miles south on Walker Road to Lynx Creek Road (FR 9401, signed Lynx Creek Ruins/Salida Gulch), turn left and go 1 mile to the trailhead. Begin hiking on trail 9263, hop the creek and look for the trail 95 junction in about 0.1 mile.

JOHNS TANK

Prescott National Forest

Bald eagles are frequently observed nesting near Prescott's Lynx Lake. Since they first appeared in the winter of 2002, breeding pairs of the quintessential American raptors have commandeered lakeside osprey nests to raise their chicks. When the eagles are on the nest – which may not happen every year – Johns Tank Trail 94, the hiking trail that traverses their breeding territory, is closed to human travel from February through June to give the hatchlings thebest chance to thrive.

The trail explores a bird-friendly environment of ponderosa pine forests swaying over trout-rich waters, while tethering two loop routes in the foothills of the Bradshaw Mountains. There's no dedicated trailhead for Johns Tank, so it must be accessed by either Lakeshore Trail 311 to its west or Salida Gulch Trail 95 to the north. To take the lake access option, hike 0.1 mile west on Trail 311 to the Trail 94 junction. This mile-long segment passes through deep woods and resinous air as it ascends the hills above the water. After climbing 300 feet, the trail arrives at a juniper-shaded high point with nice views of Spruce and Granite Mountains that precede a dip into Salida Gulch.

Turn right at the Trail 95 junction and hike less than one-tenth of a mile to a sign that points to the right. To the left, a rudimentary path leads to Johns Tank, a sometimes moist but mostly muddy wildlife watering hole. Trail 95 dives farther into the gulch by way of hairpin turns pinched tight by vertical granite walls. About halfway through the loop, look for faint petroglyphs in a stony grotto.

The route bottoms out on a bank above Lynx Creek, then swings south and uphill to reconnect with Trail 94. Retrace your steps back to the lake and head left to circle the water on Trail 311. This 2.3-mile walk stays close to shore, making it a convenient corridor for anglers looking for a secluded spot to reel in dinner. Mind the tackle boxes and coolers.

Tracing numerous finger coves, the route is draped in willows, cottonwoods and trunk-snuggling cattails. You'll pass a boat launch, where people shove off on paddle boards, fishing boats and kayaks, before you arrive back at the start point.

LOWER GRANITE CREEK SCENIC TRAILS

City of Prescott

Lakeside views, waterfowl galore and route-finding through a maze of 1.4-billion-year-old granite rock formations keep things interesting on this intertwined collection of short trails.

Although there are countless ways to explore these scenic gems, here's one option that samples some of the highlights: From the trailhead, follow Peavine Trail north to the turnoff on the right for Lakeshore Trail – there's a big boulder with a plaque just past the 1-mile post. From here, finding your way is easy. Trail signs with maps are placed roughly every quarter mile and where the trail crosses slickrock. Follow the painted white dots to stay on course. The first detour comes at the Treehouse Loop, a very rocky segment that's sure to bring out the kid in you. Yes, there really is a treehouse lodged in an alligator juniper.

Next up is a little traipse to Secret Cove, which is worth the diversion if only to creep up on the great blue herons and egrets that love the seclusion afforded by this mini fjord.

Farther along is the Over the Hill trail, which crosses Boulder Creek on its way to Watson Dam. This winding path is almost 100 percent on bare rock and includes a couple of slick and steep sections. Near the end, the trail dips down to Granite Creek and swings south following the reed-lined stream to a narrow metal bridge below the dam that connects hikers to the Flume/Watson Dam trails that lead to the Granite Dells Road trailhead.

LENGTH: up to 6 miles

Lakeshore Trail: 2 miles one way

Over the Hill Trail: 0.4 mile one way

Discovery Trail: 0.8 mile one way

Tree House Loop-Secret Cove: 0.1 mile each

Watson Dam-Flume Trail: 1.17 miles one way

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION:

Lakeshore Trail: 5,160-5,220 feet

Over the Hill Trail: 5,076-5,194 feet

Discovery Trail: 5,158-5,188 feet

Watson Dam-Flume Trail: 5,057-5,186 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

DOGS: must be leashed

FEE: $3 daily parking fee

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

South Access:

Peavine-Watson Woods Trailhead, 1626 Sundog Ranch Rd., Prescott:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 1.7 miles north on Prescott Lakes Parkway to Sundog Ranch Road, turn right and continue 0.2 mile to Peavine Trail/Watson Woods Riparian Preserve parking area.

North Access:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go north on State Route 89 to Granite Dells Road, turn right (east) and continue to the parking area on the right.

Alderleaf Mountain Mahogany
Blooms: Spring

MOUNT FRANCIS

Prescott National Forest

There's no shortage of hikeable peaks in the Prescott area, and this sweet little find on the fringes of Log Cabin Vacation Land holds its own among its loftier, more remote peers.

Remarkably easy to access for a mountain trek, the route is a web of forest roads, ATV tracks and hiking trails. To seasoned hikers, the tiny 800 feet of elevation change from the trailhead to the peak may seem like an outing for amateurs, however, once on the trail, unrelenting dips and climbs easily add up to three times the advertised ascent. There are many ways to hitch together a loop hike using the labyrinth of dirt roads and footpaths circling the antennae-cluttered peak, which resembles a lumpy knoll. A good map and a compass will be your best tools to avoid frustration and aimless wandering in this scrubby terrain of juniper and yucca.

LENGTH: 7.8-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,266-7,110 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From downtown Prescott, go 1 mile south on Montezuma Street to Copper Basin Road, turn right and continue 4.6 miles on Copper Basin to the Aspen Creek Trailhead on the right. Roads are paved up to the last 1.6 miles, which is sedan-friendly dirt.

Here's a tried and true route: From the trailhead, cross Copper Basin Road and pick up Aspen Creek Trail 48, follow the "48" signs 2.9 miles to the junction with East Copper Trail 260. Turn right (north) and hike 0.5 mile to a three-way junction with a gate. Head up the road with the gate to the summit of Mount Francis.

Once done exploring the peak, head back down to the first shed with antennae and turn right onto the road below the power lines. Soon, you'll pass through another gate. At this point, you're on Forest Road 9402D. Follow this aspen-fringed track to Copper Basin Road, turn right and hike roughly a mile back to the trailhead.

MOUNT UNION

Prescott National Forest

Priceless glimpses of Arizona's beautiful central highlands await hikers on the summit of Mount Union, the 7,979-foot high point of the Bradshaw mountain range. Although this granite pinnacle is little more than the loftiest lump on a forested ridge above the Hassayampa River Basin, a hike to the peak still manages to deliver an enjoyable mountain experience complete with panoramic views, dizzying canyon drop-offs and a fire tower that has been in active service since 1933. The uphill slog to "bag the summit" begins on the Dandrea Trail 285. At just under the 1-mile point, turn right onto the Yankee Doodle Trail 284 and follow the cliff-hugging path to the peak through a landscape infused with weather-worn scrub and eroding volcanic rock.

Douglas Fir Pine Cone

LENGTH: 4 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,849-7,979 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 10.5 miles south on Walker Road (milepost 293) to Poachers Row Road, turn left. Follow the road to its end, where there's a sign for trail 285 across the creek. There's limited parking along the road. Do not park in or block the private driveways in the area.

SALIDA GULCH LOOP

Prescott National Forest

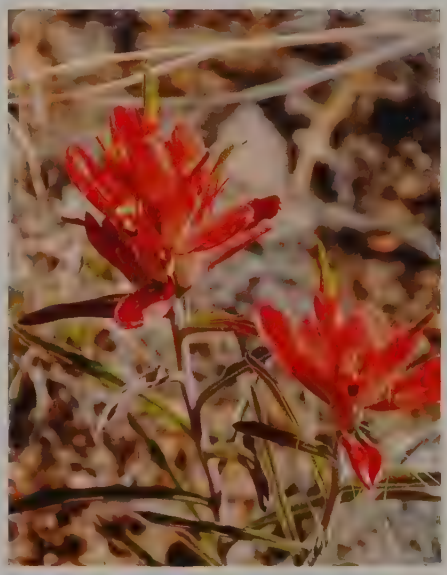
When it comes to historical gold ore hot spots in Arizona's hills, the mountains around Prescott held the mother lode. Defunct mining operations have pretty much depleted the area's precious metal deposits, leaving behind dredge tailing and pipe dreams for prospectors.

Lynx Creek flows through the heart of this gold country and is a popular spot for recreational treasure hunters panning for dust and nuggets. The Salida Gulch Trail 95 begins at a section of the creek undergoing restoration from the effects of decades of mining. It's a beautiful riparian strip with crisp water tumbling over a pebbly waterway that hikers must cross to pick up the trail. Roughly 0.1 mile beyond the creek, pass a gate and then look for the turnoff for trail 95 on the right. The loop begins within a few yards – go left for the shady "gulch" leg or right for the sunny "ridge" side. It all circles back.

The gulch leg is a 1.6-mile trek through a narrow, stone-entrenched canyon. Views are sparse, but intermittent streams and runoff channels foster a cooling canopy of pine-oak woodlands and blooming shrubs. At about the half-mile point, a prominent prehistoric rock art gallery of decorative coils, intricately sketched game animals and mystifying human forms are incised into massive gray boulders to the left of the trail. There's another panel farther up the path, but it's not so easy to spot.

A mile beyond the petroglyphs, the trail makes a sharp turn and begins climbing to the ridge above the gulch. This 2.4-mile leg leaves the forests and enters a scrubland of junipers, yucca and manzanita with views of Prescott's famous Granite Mountain and the towers on Spruce Mountain. At one point, you can look down on the gulch leg of the loop winding below, off to the right.

For a trail located just about a mile south of a busy Costco shopping center and adjacent to popular Lynx Lake Recreation Area, this easy-on-the-feet hike is surprisingly quiet and enjoyable.



Desert Paintbrush
Blooms: March-September

LENGTH: 4.5-mile loop (includes access trail 9263)

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 5,050-5,742 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go1.2 miles south on Walker Road (milepost 293) to Lynx Creek Road (Forest Road R9401, signed for Lynx Creek Ruins/Salida Gulch), turn left and continue 1 mile to the trailhead at the forest boundary sign. Begin hiking on trail 9263, hop the creek and look for the trail 95 junction in about 0.1 mile.

Boxelder
Blooms: April-May

SOUTH THUMB BUTTE TRAILS

Prescott

Soaring to 6,514 feet, the sky-dominating profile of Thumb Butte is Prescott's most iconic natural landmark. Its convenient location in the middle of a park west of downtown's historic Whiskey Row attracts scores of visitors, many of whom use the main Trail 33 as their first exposure to Prescott-area hiking.

Although it's a good choice for novice hikers or those unfamiliar with the area's terrain, a slew of connecting routes add length and difficulty to satisfy the predilections of most trekkers. The heaviest-traveled of the seven routes in the park's south end, Trail 33 is engineered with climb-calming switchbacks, safety rails and rest stops that make short work of the 2.1-mile loop around the granite formation. When hiking clockwise from the trailhead, the path is paved up to the loop's high point on a saddle below vertical rock slabs forming the butte's summit.

Here, a spur trail (closed from February 1-July 15 to protect peregrine falcon nesting sites) leads to optional rock scrambling routes. The trail turns to dirt for the return leg, passing a makeshift memorial to the 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots who perished in the 2013 Yarnell Hill wildfire. Maps available at the trailhead show the lay of the land and numerous ways to explore deeper into Prescott National Forest, including easy connectivity with the Prescott Circle Trail that makes a 54-mile circuit around the city.

LENGTH: 8.3 miles total for seven trails

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,705-6,314 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

HOURS: seasonal 7 a.m. to 5, 7 or 8 p.m.

FEE: $5 (bring exact change)

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From downtown Prescott, travel 3.4 miles west on Gurley Street (turns into Thumb Butte Road) to the Thumb Butte Recreation Area on the right.

STORM TRAILS

City of Prescott

LENGTH: 6 miles (not including the 1.5-mile one-way access hike on the Peavine Trail)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,150-5,300 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

FEE: $3 daily parking fee

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

1626 Sundog Ranch Rd., Prescott:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 1.7 miles north on Prescott Lakes Parkway to Sundog Ranch Road, turn right and continue 0.2 mile to the Peavine Trail/Watson Woods Riparian Preserve parking area..

The best trails are those that respect the terrain through which they cut, following the land's natural contours to unwind like humble spectators rather than intruders. The newest additions to the Prescott Mile-High Trail System do just that in a seemingly impenetrable labyrinth of stone.

Early in 2018, the city of Prescott purchased a 160-acre parcel east of Watson Lake to preserve the geologically unique space while allowing for recreational use. Shortly after the land was acquired, work on the Storm Trails System got underway, and the first routes officially opened on March 31, 2018. Situated deep in the striking beauty of the Granite Dells, the loopy network spins off from the Prescott Peavine National Recreation Trail 1.5 miles north of the trailhead on Sundog Ranch Road. The maze of short, interconnected paths meander among billion-year-old granite crags, secluded grasslands, dramatic washes and shady corridors of scrub oak.

The first of several gateways to the system is located across from a vista point overlooking Watson Lake. From here, the 0.67-mile Easter Island Trail wastes no time delivering the goods. The low-profile path dives right into a heart of rocks, sidestepping obstacles on its way to a knoll above the lake with breathtaking views of Granite Mountain, Glassford Hill and a bizarre landscape of Precambrian stone pillars. Within the first half mile, how the trail got its name becomes apparent. Perched atop a jumbled mound of weathered granite, two majestic monoliths that resemble the famous ancient sculptures found on Rapa Nui (the volcanic Pacific reef also known as Easter Island) stand out above a basin of boulders. The nature-sculpted pair of humanlikeforms – one with a bulging eye and the other wearing a mischievous smirk – balance on a crest, silent and focused as if commanding an army of rock goblins. Beyond the stony sentinels, the trail crosses Boulder Creek and evolves into an insanely entertaining web of mini loops.

With names like Pebbles, Bam Bam, Dino Canyon and Bedrock City, the swooping footpaths that propel hikers through nooks, bends and narrow stone corridors are a perfect homage to their 1960s *The Flintstones* cartoon namesakes. Immerse yourself in the playful theme and it's almost like hiking in a page right out of history through the courtesy of Fred's two feet. (Props to the Hanna-Barbera jingle.)

There are no dull moments in this ticklish intersection. Every turn reveals a fresh view or an interesting feature. Even the stuff underfoot changes at the pace of a manic animated flick. The mix of soft dirt single track, sandy washes and tricky slickrock passages where white paint dots guide the way make for a mildly challenging, ever tantalizing hike.

Even though the bizarre pillars and fractured joints of the Granite Dells are the main attractions, the system's Boulder Creek Trail adds a splash of blue with a cottonwood-lined waterway, cascades and reflecting pools that soften the high-desert terrain. As satisfying as the Storm Trails are right now, they're not finished yet. The planned 6-mile system is on track to be completed by the end of this year. Who knows? Maybe Wilma and Fred will get trails, too.

WATSON WOODS RIPARIAN PRESERVE

City of Prescott

LENGTH: 0.5 mile one way

RATING: easy, educational

ELEVATION: 5,100 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

HOURS: 7 a.m.-10 p.m.

FACILITIES: restrooms

DOGS: must be leashed; all droppings must be packed out

GETTING THERE:

1626 Sundog Ranch Rd., Prescott:

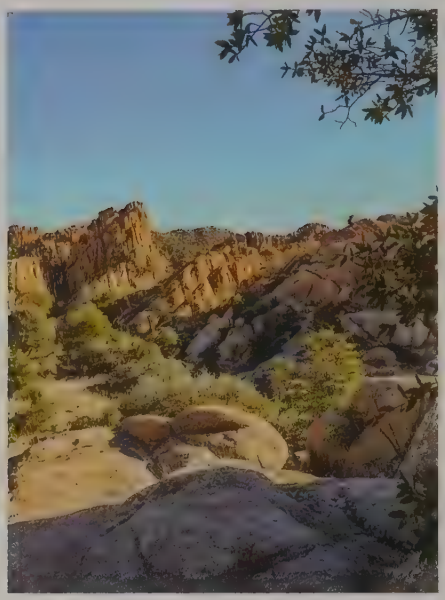
From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 1.7 miles north on Prescott Lakes Parkway to Sundog Ranch Road. Turn right and go 0.2 mile to Peavine Trail/Watson Woods Riparian Preserve parking area.

A sign at the trailhead proclaims that Watson Woods has been designated an "important bird habitat" by the National Audubon Society. This is an understatement. This streamside forest of cottonwood, walnut and other moisture-loving plants along lower Granite Creek was nearly lost to the ravages of modern development. However, thanks to the efforts of the city of Prescott and Prescott Creeks (local watershed stewards), the woodlands are being restored.

Today, the preserve is a 126-acre bird and wildlife haven. Even though it's just yards off busy State Route 69, the lush waterway boasts a bevy of natural wonders. A scenic interpretive trail guides hikers among restored wetlands, canopies of gigantic, centuries-old trees, ponds and marshes. Signs at the trailhead and along the route describe the sights and chronicle ongoing restoration efforts.

Red-Winged Blackbird

In addition to a sturdy pair of shoes for the dirt walkways, bring along a pair of binoculars (to see birds galore) and a hearty appetite for knowledge – you won't be disappointed. For those who want to extend their hike, the preserve trail connects with adjacent Watson Lake Park, the Lower Granite Creek trail system and the Prescott Peavine National Recreation Trail.



Desert Onion
Blooms: March-June

LENGTH: 3.3 miles (seven connected trails)

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 5,080-5,180 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

FEE: $3 daily parking fee

DOGS: must be leashed; pack out waste

GETTING THERE:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go north on Prescott Lakes Parkway to Willow Lake Road. Turn left and continue to Willow Creek Road. Turn right and proceed to Heritage Park Road (across from Embry-Riddle University). Turn right and then make an immediate right onto Heritage Park Creek and follow the signs to the to the trailhead.

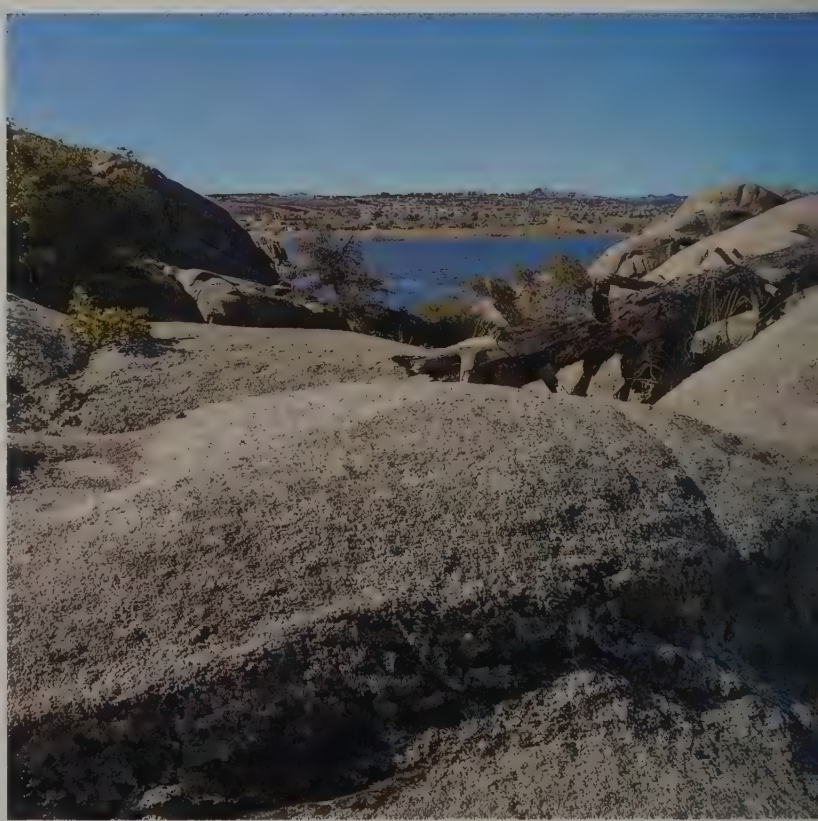
WILLOW DELLS SLICKROCK TRAILS

City of Prescott

Thank goodness for the volunteers of the city of Prescott's Parks & Recreation Department who help maintain the "white dot" trails in the Granite Dells area. Without those little spray-painted directional beacons, it would be impossible to stay on course.

Hiking in Prescott's Granite Dells is like getting lost in a stone labyrinth, with a "be one with the rock" kind of vibe. The network of paths on the north shore of Willow Lake coil through hulking, quartz-studded granite buttes squeezing in and out on the paths like a heaving accordion.

The rugged, meandering loop trails move seamlessly from claustrophobically tight spaces to airy exposed promontories with unobstructed vistas. Don't be put off by the short hiking distance – the trails are a varied, complex mashup with high steps, cagey twists and surprises around every bend.



WOLF CREEK FALLS

Prescott National Forest

Wolf Creek is dry most of the year, but when winter snow on the Bradshaw Mountain begins to melt, this waterway comes alive for a few weeks. Just before the creek dumps into the Hassayampa River, it tumbles through a narrow granite gorge, spilling icy water over slickrock into drop pools 90 feet below the cliffs. A quarter-mile "waterfall alley" features two major falls, as well as water chutes, natural dams and cascades.

From the Groom Creek trailhead, hike across Senator Highway to the Horse Camp entrance. The hike begins at the "383" sign at the south side of the camp gate. From here, follow Trail 383 (some signs say "383/384") 1 mile to the junction for trail 384. Beyond this point, keep an eye out for "384" signage to stay on track. After about 2.5 miles, the trail meets a wide dirt road (County Road 101). Cross here and head toward the metal gate blocking a road heading steeply downhill. This is the continuation of Trail 384, though you won't see any signage until you reach Wolf Creek in 0.3 mile.

Here, hop the creek, veer right and follow it to the falls. The upper falls are only about 0.1 mile in. The lower falls can be seen at 0.4 mile, and getting to them requires some scrambling and bush-whacking. Once done exploring, return the way you came or complete the loop by following the "384" signs posted in a clearing above the falls.

LENGTH: 6 miles round trip to the falls and back, or 7.5-mile loop

RATING: moderate

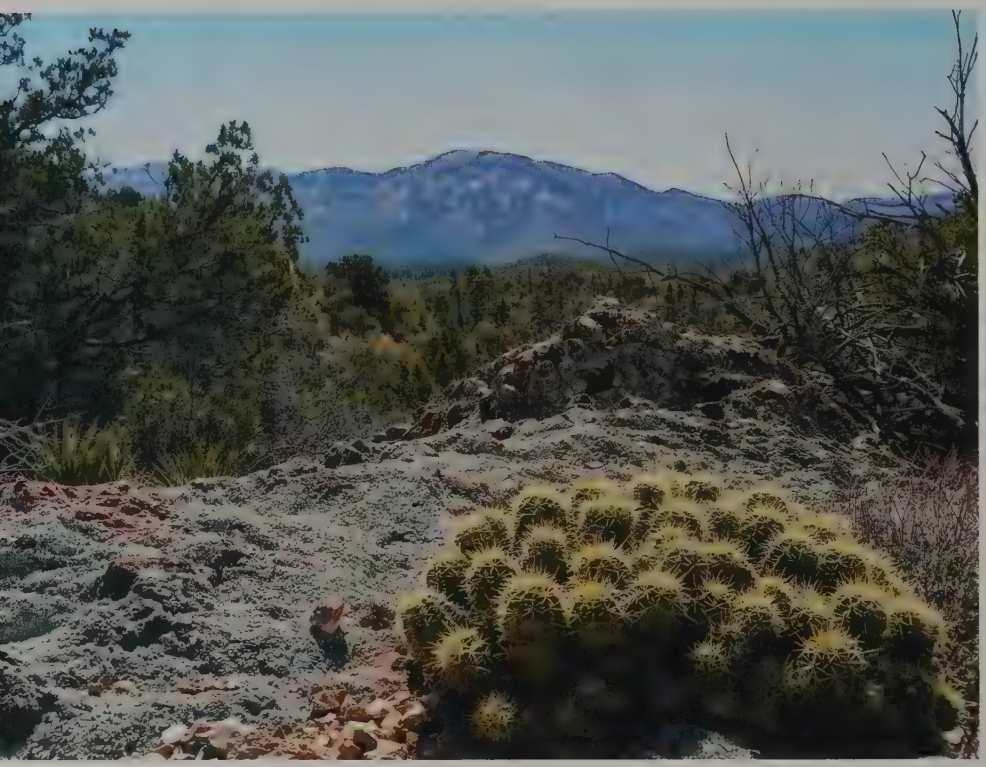
ELEVATION: 5,600-6,200 feet

BEST SEASON: March-April

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From State Route 69 in Prescott, go 6.4 miles south on Mt. Vernon Avenue (turns into Senator Highway) to the Groom Creek Trailhead. The hike begins at the Horse Camp gate. Roads are paved.



Quartz in Snow

LENGTH: 5 miles one way (7.6 miles with side trips)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 5,600-6,694 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

Aspen Creek Trailhead (west):

From downtown Prescott, go 1 mile south on Montezuma Street (turns into State Route 89/White Spar Road) to the light at Copper Basin Road. Turn right and go 4.6 miles to the Aspen Creek trailhead on the right.

White Spar Campground Trailhead (east):

From downtown Prescott, go 3 miles south on Montezuma Street (turns into State Route 89/White Spar Road) to the parking lot on the left. Trail access is south of the campground on the west side of SR 89.

WOLVERTON MOUNTAIN & WHITE SPAR PEAK

Prescott National Forest

This lovely pine-chaparral trail is meticulously signed, heavily traveled, and not too far from civilization, so there's little chance you'll lose your way. A convenient way to explore this scenic route, anchored by two easy-to-access trailheads, is to begin at the Aspen Creek lot on Copper Basin Road. From here, the hike begins across the road on the Aspen Creek Trail 48.

The hike starts with a steep 0.4-mile ascent through a shaded ravine to the turnoff for Wolverton Mountain Trail 9415 at the second junction. Note that the "9415" signs are located a few yards past the intersections, so make sure you locate them before making any turns. Along the way, two side trips make for interesting exploration.

First up, just past the gate near mile 1.2, there's a 0.5-mile dirt road heading left that leads to a weather station below a high ridge on Wolverton Mountain, where nice views of Prescott's Thumb Butte area shine below.

The second detour is a highly recommended trip up to White Spar Peak (a.k.a. Quartz Mountain). At roughly 2.5 miles, turn right onto Trail 9415A and follow a maze of old roads to a point just below the top of the snowy-white quartz massif. Here, it's easy to pick out informal footpaths that lead to the summit. You should not have to scramble or use your hands. If you find yourself doing so, locate an easier route. Well worth the extra effort, the hike up White Spar rewards with 360-degree views of Flagstaff's San Francisco Peaks, Bill Williams Mountain in Williams, the Verde River Canyon and, of course, lakes, woodlands and granite dells.

WOODCHUTE MOUNTAIN

Woodchute Wilderness

Pick a day in mid-October to hike this Prescott National Forest gem. That's when cooler temperatures and shorter days work together to paint the oak trees on Woodchute Mountain in a palette of orange and gold. The mountain is really more of a long ridgeline, with Prescott Valley on one side and grand views of the red cliffs of Sedona and the peaks of Flagstaff on the other.

Easy-to-follow Trail 102 ascends the mountain in a gently meandering style that swings from east to west, showcasing vistas of much of Northern Arizona. The hike culminates with an easy stroll across a breezy high prairie that dead-ends at the steep east face of the mountain. Here, blood-red maples and honey-colored scrub oaks frame views of Jerome and the Verde Valley.

◆

LENGTH: 7.4 miles round trip

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 7,000-7,700 feet

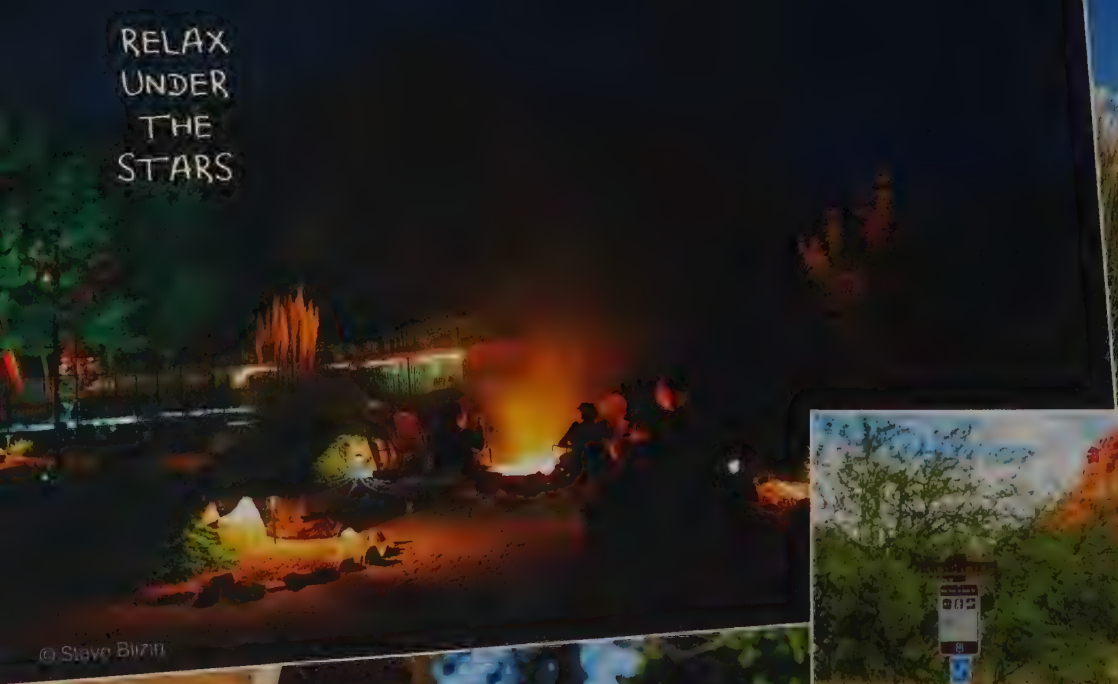
BEST SEASON: May-October

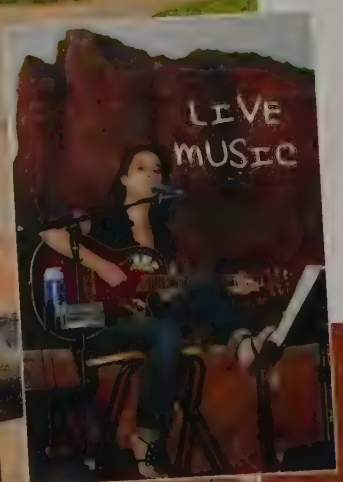
FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Jerome, go 7 miles southwest on State Route 89A to the turnoff for Potato Patch Campground. Turn right. Go 0.3 mile to the road for the Woodchute trailhead on the left. Follow it to a parking loop. Those without a high-clearance vehicle should park here. To find the trailhead, head right (east) and hike or drive (high-clearance needed) up Forest Road 106 (also signed as FR 102/106) for a half mile to the wilderness sign and trail register. If you hike the road, add 1 mile to the length above.

Oak Leaf





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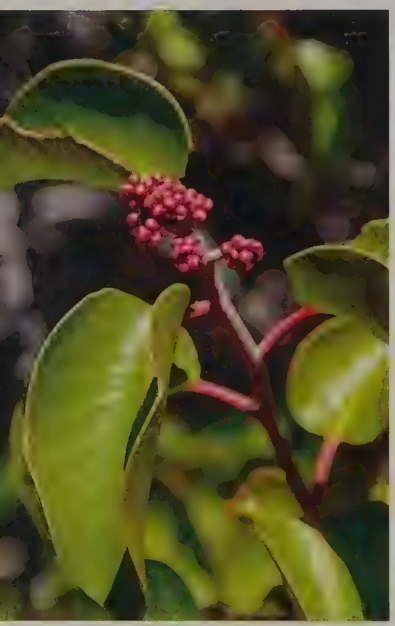


Sugar Sumac
Blooms: February-March

LENGTH: 7 miles of trails

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 4,250-4,410 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go 0.8 miles west (left, toward Cottonwood) on 89A to the trailhead on the right.

Since its completion in 2012, this cluster of new trails near downtown Sedona has become quite the hot spot for urban treks. Don't be put off by its proximity to shopping and restaurants – there's quality hiking here. Seven fresh-cut trails – Crusty, Grand Central, Coyote, Powerline Plunge, Javelina, Ant Hill Loop and Adobe Jack – add 7 miles of exploratory routes that blend with the existing Soldier Pass-Thunder Mountain systems.

Packed with gasp-worthy views, these interlaced paths were designed for long-term sustainability and easy access to Sedona's complex geology and high-desert flora. Their connectivity is a wonder – you can plan long day hikes and backpacking trips by linking with Brins Mesa trails to get to the Boynton Canyon and upper Oak Creek Canyon areas. Or, if a casual walk followed by post-trek noshing and retail therapy is your idea of an excellent adventure, this trailhead is your ideal launch pad.

AERIE-COCKSCOMB LOOP

Coconino National Forest

For hikers stepping out on Sedona's rusty soils for the first time, best bet trails to try include Boynton Canyon, Bear Mountain and Fay Canyon. Until recently, these crazy-popular routes were isolated from each other, but now the Aerie Trail tethers the trifecta of Upper Dry Creek Area trailheads to it's own roomy parking area. This new access point off Boynton Pass Road provides respite from the boot-clad masses and access to dozens of trails.

The 5.2-mile Aerie-Cockscomb loop takes off from this portal swooping around Doe Mountain and the distinctive silhouette of the Cockscomb rock formation. As with any Red Rock Country hike, views along this gently undulating trail are postcard-quality, and an optional slog up the connecting Doe Mountain spur path offers a panoramic spectacle of color saturated mesas and buttes for those willing to tag on another 1.2 miles to the trek.

From the Aerie trailhead, begin on Cockscomb Trail. Hike past the Rupp and Dawa junctions and turn left at the Aerie Trail sign at the 3.3 mile point. From here, hike 1.2 miles to the Doe Mountain junction.

This 0.7-mile spur trail climbs 460 feet to the summit of a long mesa and is well worth a detour or you can skip the climb and continue 0.7 miles back to the trailhead. All routes are signed.

LENGTH: 5.2-mile loop (6.6 with Doe Mountain spur)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,250-4,660 feet (5,120 feet with summit spur)

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, head 3.2 miles west (left toward Cottonwood) on SR 89A to Dry Creek Road. Turn right and go 2.9 miles to Boynton Pass Road (Forest Road 152C), make a left and continue 1.5 miles to a "T" junction and veer left to stay on FR 152C. Continue 1.4 miles to Aerie Road, turn left and go 0.4 mile to the turnoff for the trailhead on the right.

ANACONDA-SNAKE LOOP

Coconino National Forest

Blending old favorites with a couple of newly adopted trails, this circuit in the Cockscomb batch of routes in Sedona is a low-traffic gem. Located near several of Red Rock Country's most popular hikes (Boynton Canyon, Bear Mountain, Fay Canyon) these trails offer refreshing serenity under a fragrant cover of high desert scrub woodlands.

The trek begins on the Arizona Cypress Trail with a traipse through thickets of sage-colored juniper, the eponymous shaggy-barked evergreens and elegant white-trunk sycamores along Dry Creek. A trailhead map shows numerous ways to create loop hikes in the area. One good option is to link the Snake and Anaconda trails using Girdner Trail for the return leg. Anaconda, with its zigzagging mix of easy dips and climbs is an especially enjoyable route with many scenic views and a sprinkling of wildflowers. Choose this trek if you're looking for peace and quiet.

Arizona Cypress

LENGTH: 4.2-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,400-4,678 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go 3.2 miles west on 89A to Dry Creek Road. Turn right (north) and continue 2.7 miles to an unmarked dirt road (Forest Road R9589) on the left. This is roughly 0.1 miles before the Long Canyon Road junction. Go 0.2 miles on this narrow but sedan-friendly road to a large parking circle. Trail access is just before the circle and at the "Closed Area" sign at the south end of the lot.

LENGTH: 9.2 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 6,063-7,307 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

FACILITIES: restroom, picnic table and hitching post on the summit; nearby camping

GETTING THERE:

From Sedona, travel north on Interstate 17 to exit 306 for Stoneman Lake. Turn right and go 6.4 miles on Stoneman Lake Road (Forest Road 213) to the signed intersection for Forest Road 229. Follow FR 229 (heading toward Apache Maid LO) for 4.5 miles and bear right at a "T" intersection with Forest Road 230 to stay on FR 229. Continue 0.4 miles to a curve in the road where FR 229 swerves left and Forest Road 620 bends to the right. Here, there's a green gate marking the entrance to Apache Maid Cabin. Park in the turnoffs along the road. From this point, it's a 4.6-mile one-way hike to the summit. Alternatively, you can continue driving up FR 620 to a parking apron at a gate that's 1.8 miles from the summit. We also noted good parking opportunities near Forest Road 2938J, which is 3.4 miles from the summit and cuts about 200 feet of climbing.

FR 213 is paved for a while, then turns to good dirt suitable for all vehicles. FR 229 and beyond is a mix of smooth dirt and deeply rutted washboard. Although we saw sedans parked along the way, a high-clearance vehicle is a much better idea.

APACHE MAID MOUNTAIN

Coconino National Forest

Just east of Interstate 17, 30 miles south of Flagstaff, the isolated silhouette of Apache Maid Mountain juts above a muted emerald expanse of juniper-dotted grasslands. Because of its unchallenged dominance on the landscape, a climb up this peak rewards with breathtaking vistas of Sedona's red rocks, the mountains of Prescott and the canyon-riddled watershed highlands of Wet Beaver Creek and the Verde River.

Although this peak also can be conquered via a 17-mile one-way (3,864-7,307 feet) hike on the Apache Maid Trail that begins on the Bell Trail at Wet Beaver Creek, the way is difficult, dry and best suited for highly experienced hikers. If getting to the high point is your main objective, then scratch the tortuous miles and instead tackle the massif from its base. The trail is Forest Road 620, a wide red-soil track hacked out of the mountainside. Twisting up the south and west faces of the hill in long, gradual hairpin coils, the road makes for a pleasant, not-too-tough climb through a mishmash of Ponderosa pines, oak and scrub while flowering plants splatter color on disturbed road shoulders and sun-washed meadows.

About a half mile from the top, a jumbled boulder ledge frames exceptional views of Red Rock Country as an abrupt break at the edge of a sprawling windswept prairie. On the summit, a fire lookout built in 1961 teeters over its watershed ward. The tower is open by invitation only when a worker is present. Otherwise, visitors may relax at the picnic table tucked into a shady glen of oak trees.

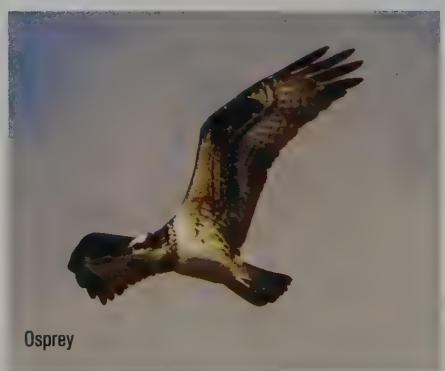
BUBBLING PONDS PRESERVE & PAGE SPRINGS HATCHERY

Cornville

Hikers who enjoy wildlife viewing will have a field day at the Bubbling Ponds Preserve in Cornville. Cradled among desert hills, wineries and dewy green zones along Oak Creek, the site has two formal trails that loop among the property's rare and varied habitats. The flat, soft paths pass through mesquite forests, meadows, cattail wetlands, a warm water hatchery for raising native fish and a shady riparian corridor.

Because of its reliable water and favorable nesting niches, the property is a sanctuary for resident and migratory birds, reptiles and mammals, including several threatened species. Hikers are practically guaranteed sightings of great blue herons, red-winged blackbirds and many common species of waterfowl. With luck, you might also spot a more elusive Snowy Egret, Vermillion Flycatcher or river otter among reeds and willows.

In addition to the two main trails – Black Hawk Trail and the shorter Willow Point Loop, both accessible right off the parking area – the adjacent Lower Oak Creek Important Bird Area and Page Springs Fish Hatchery offer more miles of wildlife-rich exploratory hiking. Dedicated in May 2016, the preserve is a joint effort between the Arizona Game & Fish Department (which owns the property) and Northern Arizona Audubon Society, which funds site improvements and trail maintenance through private donations. Ongoing Audubon volunteer projects work to eradicate invasive plants and protect sensitive ecosystems while providing public education events.



Osprey

LENGTH: 2.3 miles

Black Hawk Trail: 1.8 miles

Willow Point Loop: 0.5 mile

RATING: easy

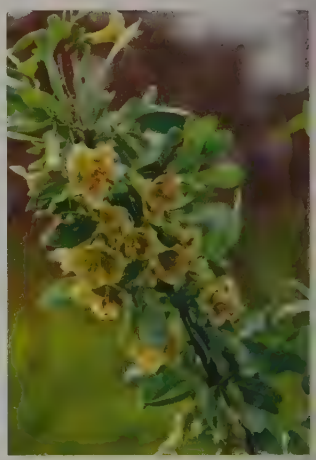
ELEVATION: 3,328-3,492 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

HOURS: open daily dawn to dusk

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17 near Cornville, take the McGuireville exit 293, go 8 miles west on Cornville Road, turn right onto Page Springs Road and continue 4.8 miles to the entrance on the left.



Rabbit Thorn
Blooms: April-June

Curly Dock
Blooms: May-October

CANYON of FOOLS

Coconino National Forest

Canyon of Fools might be the weirdest hike in Sedona. Located in the Mescal Mountain cluster of trails northwest of town, the keynote feature of the route is a gnarly, half-mile walk through a red-earth labyrinth. Unlike other Red Rock Country hikes, this one ditches open air, ooh-aah vistas in favor of a cloistered trudge through a dirt tunnel.

The adventure begins within a few yards of the trailhead off Boynton Pass Road, where the trail ducks into a serpentine gulch that morphs from a roomy corridor into a claustrophobic, high-walled canyon with tree roots protruding in arthritic tangles.

The rough-cut passage twists among flaking shelves of sandstone and side canyons sculpted into bizarre forms by running water and erosion. You'd earn the title of fool by trying to hike here during a rainstorm, for you'd surely be swept away in a torrent of mud and debris. The creepily distorted gulch is softened with a cap of wildflowers, grasses and familiar cypress-juniper woodlands.

At several spots, mounds of decomposed sediments spill out like syrupy rivers of russet oatmeal, dividing the trail into easy and more difficult paths that loop around the debris and reconnect on the backside. Once through the half-mile canyon section, the trail gradually opens into more conventional high desert terrain where it meets the Yucca Trail junction. The massive landform directly ahead is Mescal Mountain. This is your first opportunity to consult a map to plan your return route, as several trails that wend around the mountain's base can be used to make loop hikes.

With the canyon portion of the trek behind you, head left and continue hiking over slick rock and edgy paths to where the route ends at Deadman's Pass Trail. For an out-and-back trek, this is your turnaround point.

Otherwise, keep trekking north into Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness and Boynton Canyon or swing right for a scenic walk over an exposed mesa before picking up a connecting path to to loop back to the trailhead.

Yucca Fruit

LENGTH: 2.25 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 4,440- 4,640 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go 3.2 miles west (left) on SR 89A to Dry Creek Road. Go 2.8 miles on Dry Creek, veer left at the Long Canyon Road junction and continue 0.5 mile on Boynton Pass Road to the parking turnout on the right. A Red Rock Pass is not required at this trailhead.

CHAVEZ TRAIL & BEAVERHEAD TANK

Coconino National Forest

When confronted with a befuddling trail junction, many hikers opt to bypass the unknown and follow their researched route. In most cases, that's a smart move. But while even long-established paths can be fraught with challenges, some forks in the road can be low-risk diversions that are too sweet to ignore.

You'll experience both elements on this two-part trek near Sedona. The recently relocated and documented Chavez Road has a captivating history as a prehistoric trade route, mule and oxen trail and freight transit system for Verde Valley pioneers. The steep, rough-cut road was an important travel route until 20th century railroads and the General Crook Trail provided safer, more efficient means of transportation. By the 1920s, the abandoned route began to melt into oblivion, succumbing to neglect and encroaching vegetation.

Recognizing an opportunity for "adaptive reuse," the forest service took on the exhaustive process of surveying and preserving the historic road for recreational use. The 9-mile section that runs between State Route 179 south of Sedona and the Stoneman Lake interchange off Interstate 17 has been identified, marked with cairns (rock stacks) and opened to non-motorized travel. The entire segment can be hiked via car shuttle, a grueling out-and-back hike or sampled as an exploratory day trek. Although starting on the upper I-17 trailhead for a downhill hike sounds like a no-brainer, this choice trades avoidance of strenuous climbs for serious route-finding obstacles. Hikers must have a keen sense of direction to leap-frog from cairn-to-cairn to stay on track.

For a less complicated outing, the lower trail offers a tougher climb but a better-defined route. Beginning at the SR 179 trailhead, hike through the gate and follow the rocky road to the 0.1-mile point where the Chavez Trail veers right at the 9204T sign. The wide road to the left is an add-on surprise for the way back. From the junction, the route ascends 1,000 feet in just under 2 miles among pinion-juniper woodlands on a ragged, edge-hugging road to the top of a mesa with spectacular Red Rock Country and Bradshaw Mountain views.

This is an ideal turnaround point for a moderate day hike. Unless you decide to take on the remaining 7 miles of head-scratching hiking, descend back to the 9204T junction and pick up the unsigned road heading north.

This easy-to-follow, 0.8-mile diversion tacks on 400 feet of elevation gain to the hike as it winds its way to Beaverhead Tank. Tucked into a breezy hollow, the secluded, weedy stock pond and a defunct feeding trough at the end of a road less traveled sees few visitors other than roaming cattle and chipping parades of quail.

◇

LENGTH & ELEVATION:

Chavez Trail to Interstate-17:
9.1 miles one way, 3,720-5,320 feet

Chavez Trail to the rim:
4 miles round trip, 3,720-4,400 feet

Beaverhead Tank Road:
2 miles round trip, 3,720-4,120 feet

RATING: moderate-difficult

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

Lower Trailhead:

From I-17, take exit 298 for Sedona/Oak Creek and head 3.4 miles west on State Route 179 to just past milepost 302. Turn right onto an unsigned dirt parking circle on the right. If you reach the Welcome to Red Rock Scenic Byway monument at Dry Beaver Creek, you've gone 0.2 mile too far. The hike begins at the gate marked 9204S.

Upper Trailhead:

From I-17, take Stoneman Lake exit 306 and follow Stoneman Lake Road (Forest Road 213) to the trailhead on the left.

CIBOLA PASS-JORDAN LOOP

Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness Area

As implausible as it may seem, some people driving through Sedona are in a hurry. It happens, but it's no excuse to forfeit a hike in order to beat the traffic or catch a flight. Many of Sedona's trails offer drive-up-and-hike convenience and clever connectivity that accommodates those who have only a couple of hours to indulge in a picture-perfect jaunt. Take, for instance, the Cibola Pass-Jordan Loop.

When hiked from the Jim Thompson Trailhead, located just a short drive from uptown Sedona, this heavenly trek that slices through forests at the southern edge of the Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness, gets you in-and-out of the good stuff pronto. As the average hiker moves at about 2-3 miles per hour, it's possible to whip through this 2.2-mile circuit in just over an hour – provided you can limit ogling and photo stops. The hike scrimps on length but splurges on scenery and workout value. From the parking area, start hiking at the Cibola Pass post near the fee pay station. Continue a few yards to a three-way junction and continue straight ahead on the Cibola Pass Trail. Hiking the loop in this direction gets the steep climbing out of the way within the first half mile. The abrupt but not-too-difficult climb is a mashup of switchbacks and flat rest areas overlooking the deep cuts of Mormon Canyon and layers of sheer wilderness mesas. The signature feature along this section is the hand-shaped, russet stone tower that caps Mitten Ridge. The route makes a brief passage though the wilderness area on slickrock slopes with stunning juniper-framed views before dipping into a shady drainage.

At the 0.7-mile point, the circuit meets the Jordan Trail junction. Time permitting, take an optional 0.6-mile round-trip venture by heading right to see Devil's Kitchen – an impressive sandstone sinkhole. To stick with the quick-trip plan, go left at the junction and make a swift ramble on the Jordan Trail through a 1.5-mile pocket of fragrant cypress, giant agaves and oak-fringed bluffs. You'll be back at the trailhead in a flash with dusty boots and time to spare.

LENGTH: 2.2 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,520-4,682 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restroom

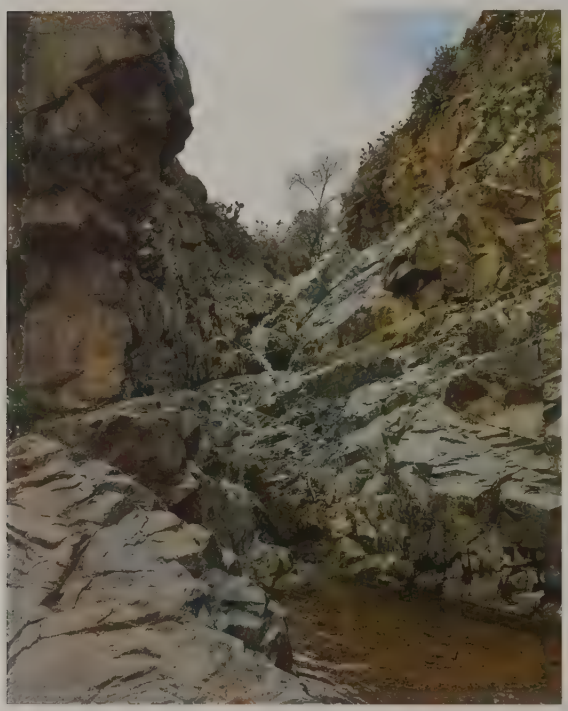
FEE: Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required.

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go right onto 89A. Continue 0.3 mile to Jordan Road on the left. Go 0.8 mile on Jordan, turn left onto Park Ridge Dr. and continue 0.5 mile to the Jim Thompson Trailhead on the right. The last half mile is on a gravel road with potholes but is suitable for all carefully driven vehicles.

COPPER FALLS

Prescott National Forest



LENGTH: 4.1-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 3,190-3,533 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic ramadas with grills at trailhead

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17 in Camp Verde, take the State Route 260 exit 287. Go 1.6 miles east (toward Payson) on SR 260 to Oasis Drive, turn right (south) and continue 0.3 mile to Forest Road 136, turn right again and go 0.8 mile to the trailhead on the right. FR 136 is washboard-rough dirt but is passable by passenger vehicles.

Chasing winter waterfalls is sort of an unofficial rite of passage for Arizona hikers.

With a few blaring exceptions (hello, Havasupai) most of our state's waterfalls don't flow continually. Experienced hikers know that dark-stained cliffs and jumbled drainages visible along trails hold the potential for spectacular waterworks following episodes of rain and snow melt. Some trekkers even adjust their agendas to sync with the rhythm of the rains.

Timing is key to catch the transient desert founts at their best. Pick a day after a storm but pay attention to weather reports and road closures as torrential downpours come with a real threat of potentially deadly flooding. The fugitive waterworks aren't hard to find. A few famous ones like Encinoso Falls in Sedona's Oak Creek Canyon, Massacre Falls in the Superstition Wilderness and the miles of cascades in Barnhardt Canyon flow reliably along established trails during peak conditions.

Others though, reside where you'd least expect them. One such cascade is the crux of Copper Falls Trail 504. Tucked into a pocket of colorfully layered sediments that separate the Verde River from Interstate 17, this non-motorized route is the result of grassroots efforts driven by the residents of nearby Camp Verde. Following years of working together with Prescott National Forest, the Copper Canyon trailhead project came to fruition with the support of donated materials and volunteer labor. The roomy, well-outfitted recreation hub officially opened in February 2012.

The site anchors a popular recreation area south of State Route 260 that's known for its ATV routes and river-access for fishing and paddling. Trail 504 explores above and within a bowl-like depression of an ancient lake bed where limestone and siltstone deposits disrupted by faults and other geological events have eroded into oddly sculpted buttes, ridges and gullies. The 4.1-mile, moderate loop hike begins at a gate in the northwest corner of the trailhead. Hike a few yards, then veer left at a pair of generic trail signs where the route begins with a mild 300-foot climb to a crest of a ridge.

This scenic segment ascends through a bone-dry landscape dominated by Crucifixion thorn bushes and acres of cacti. Views of the gaping Verde Valley and the emerald river course backed by the hills surrounding West Clear Creek Wilderness roll out to the north and east. A mile in, the trail tops out on a grassy mesa littered with chalky white stones, a fringe of yuccas and patchy forests of junipers, scrub oaks and pinion pines.

The muffled rumble of vehicles traveling on Interstate 17 and views of Sedona's red rocks mark the beginning of an edgy traverse of the oblong mesa above a deeply furrowed basin. The airy walk ends with a swift descent on long switchbacks that end at a drainage area where a slim footpath heads into a secluded, stonewalled gorge that hides Copper Falls.

The 0.2-mile one-way path follows an ephemeral creek cluttered with sycamores, willows, log jams and boulders. Some minor route-finding and scrambling are needed to work your way through to the head of the dead-end canyon where tiered cascades tumble over blocky shelves into shallow drop pools. This leafy oasis stands in stark contrast to the arid high desert that surrounds it.

The trail then briefly traces the fall's trickling issue before meeting the Camp Verde Trail 545. At the junction that's marked with only a "504" sign, continue straight ahead, passing some old native stone foundations. Soon, the terrain transitions into mesquite-covered rangeland with a rickety corral bolstered by ashen limestone embankments.

Just beyond the corral at the 3.9-mile point, another junction marks the final decision point of the hike. Head left for a slightly longer return trip to the trailhead or veer right onto the Saloon Trail 9833 (not signed) for a shortcut.

CORNVILLE NON-MOTORIZED TRAIL SYSTEM

Coconino National Forest

Spanning the space Northeast of the Verde River between the communities of Bridgeport and Cornville is a system of trails that just got a shot in the arm.

Although the trails have been around for a while, a recent influx of grant dollars has helped fund new trailheads, signs and fresh trail construction, collectively known as The Cornville Non-Motorized Trails project. The overall goal of the county-federal partnershp is to establish a 12-mile network of routes to link the two towns.

The work in progress is coming together quickly, and is now open to hiking, biking and equestrian use. The trails located between Zalesky and Tissaw Roads are complete, signed and easy to follow. This segment of the system is anchored by the Backbone Trail which passes through a wash-riddled high desert with views of Jerome and Mingus Mountain to the west and Sedona to the north.

Two loops – Zalesky and Side Oats – attach to Backbone, making for roughly 6-7 miles of hiking between the two trailheads. The single-track dirt and sand paths brush by subdivisions, farm houses and plenty of open country with limestone escarpments and a smattering of juniper trees dotting grassy plains. This exposed landscape hosts a plethora of blooming plants, including cliff-rose, crucifixion thorn, Mormon tea and dozens of ankle-high wildflowers.

Near Tissaw Road, the trail climbs a tiny mound for glimpses of Sedona's House Mountain and the Verde River watershed. Across Tissaw Road, the system continues to evolve on the Dog Leg, Creosote and Black Grama loops.

LENGTH: 12.1 miles total

RATING: easy-moderate

ELEVATION: 3,170-3,560 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

Zalesky Road Trailhead (Bridgeport):

From Interstate 17 north of Camp Verde, take the McGuireville exit 293. Go 12.3 miles west on Cornville Road to State Route 89A. Turn left and continue 1 mile to Zalesky Road, turn left and go 0.1 miles to the trailhead on the left.

Tissaw Road Trailhead (Cornville):

From I-17 north of Camp Verde, take the McGuireville exit 293. Go 11.2 miles west on Cornville Road to Tissaw Road. Turn left. Go 1 mile to the trailhead (right).

Paintbrush
Blooms: March-September

EASY BREEZY LOOP

Coconino National Forest

At the Back O' Beyond trailhead one recent Sunday morning, a chirpy declaration from a group of young people spilling from a parked SUV broke the silence. "Cathedral Rock! Counts for church."

Regardless of where your beliefs fall on the spiritual spectrum, the trails surrounding the iconic Sedona rock formation grab your heart and don't let go. Whether the come-hither call is the result of magic, faith or the magnetic pull of the high-iron-content rocks, the emotional tug of Cathedral Rock has a way of luring hikers back again and again. The maze of trails that wrap around Cathedral Rock's looming parapets resemble a medieval fortress, and offer many ways to commune with the stony behemoth.

Trail choices include a rugged scramble to a scenic saddle, edge-hugging rambles, creekside walks and easy forest strolls.

LENGTH: 3.3 miles

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 3,998-4,203 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: A Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required.

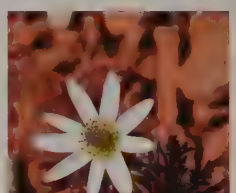
FACILITIES: restroom

GETTING THERE:

Back O' Beyond/Cathedral Rock Trailhead:

From Interstate 17, take the Sedona/Oak Creek exit 298. Turn left (west) and continue 11 miles on State Route 179 to the traffic circle at Back O' Beyond Road near milepost 310. Veer left and go 0.6 mile on Back O' Beyond to the trailhead on the left.

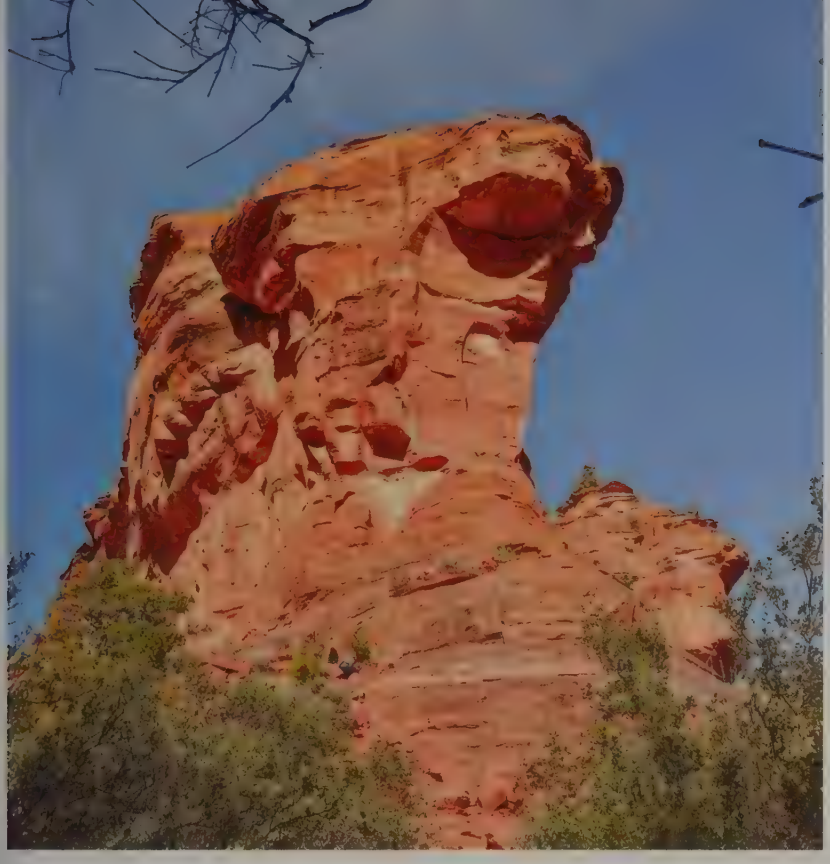
A less busy option that samples the many moods of this enchanting landscape is a hike on the Easy Breezy-Templeton Loop. From the Cathedral Rock trailhead, the circuit steers clear of the crowds by heading left on the Easy Breezy Trail. The theme of the circuit's first mile is immediately revealed as the path drops into a scoured drainage channel. Alternating between cloistered cypress-pinion woodlands and open spaces of filtered sunlight, the route makes several wash crossings aided by native stone "stairs" built into water-carved embankments. Annual deluges have exposed layers of colorful sediments and the artful stylings of tree roots that sprawl snake-like through spillways of sand, stone and crystalline pools.



Desert Anemone
Blooms: February-April

The HT Trail junction marks the end of the shaded, water-centric leg of the hike. Head right at the sign and follow HT Trail uphill for a 0.3-mile traipse through high-desert grasslands with clear views of seldom-seen angles of Cathedral Rock and the familiar silhouettes of Courthouse Butte and the Two Nuns formations. At the Templeton Trail junction, go right and follow the swerving path as it works its way toward an exposed slickrock passage on the east flanks of Cathedral Rock. Clinging to the barren mound, the trail swings north to meet the west end of the Easy Breezy Trail. The junction sign here points into a ravine with no obvious trail.

If you choose this 0.4-mile return leg option, be prepared for some route finding, bike traffic and loose rock. Otherwise, continue north on Templeton and connect with the less confusing Cathedral Rock Trail to get back to the trailhead, where a map kiosk can help harness the metaphysical or earth-grounded urge for more into a return trip.



FAY CANYON

Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness Area

LENGTH: 1.2 miles one way

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 4,500-4,800 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, veer left. Go 3.2 miles on SR 89A to Dry Creek Road (Forest Road 152C). Turn right, go 4.5 miles to Boynton Canyon Road, turn left. Go 0.5 mile to the trailhead.

Loosen the vice grip on your brain's imagination center and the russet stone escarpments embracing Sedona's Fay Canyon Trail transform into dragon scales, crouching gremlins and otherworldly beasts.

Of course, rousing this kind of magical point of view needs some help. A willingness to tap into your inner child, or better yet, hiking with an actual pack of vociferous kids should do the trick. When approached without prejudice, expectation or mind-muddling electronic devices, whimsical forms hiding among the trail's sandstone cliffs seem to pounce from their precipitous perches.

Such is true with Sedona's Secret Mountain Wilderness Area. It's the "wild" in wilderness areas that sets them apart from forests, parks and other public lands.

The 1964 Wilderness Act set a global precedence for protecting unspoiled lands from development and destruction. Undisturbed lands benefit wildlife habitats, watersheds and offer opportunities for responsible recreational use. You can't drive a motorized vehicle, fly a drone, build a structure or even ride a bike in these special places.

Of Arizona's 90 protected areas, Sedona's Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness is one of the most attainable and imagination-stoking destinations in the state. It's a satisfying trip for expert backpackers and casual day-trippers alike. Seldom-seen sections (Bear Sign and Secret Canyon Trails) of the 43,950-acre wilderness are reached by hiking miles into remote backcountry, while milder excursions are just a few steps from paved roads and plush resorts.

Whether you enter this enchanted zone through a groomed front door or a rickety back gate, you'll soon understand how the simple act of walking a primal path is as much a privilege as it is a wonder to behold. A front-door favorite, the Fay Canyon trailhead on Boynton Pass Road, is outfitted with a restroom and plenty of parking. Just yards from a heavily traveled byway, the effortless out-and-back trail immediately enters the wilderness, passing through sandy drainages and sunny fields dotted with yucca and twisted manzanita shrubs. As the path narrows, the animated cliffs close in, revealing an outdoor art gallery of nature-sculpted shapes. Weathered pinnacles resemble golf tees, hammers, dancers and birds. If you're hiking with or near kids (a given on this family-friendly trail), listen to some of the names they assign to the rocks. Sponge Bob, Bart Simpson, Pokémon.

A half-mile in, a faint path on the right leads to an emerging natural arch. Barely visible from the trail, the scale of the overhang isn't apparent until you're standing beneath it. The optional, quarter-mile diversion requires scrambling on loose rock with some minor exposure but pays off with fly-over vistas and interesting nooks to explore. Forests of oak, cypress and pinion pines thicken as the root-and-vine-tangled route dives deeper into the canyon, culminating at a boulder-choked wash below a red rock formation.

The sculptural pièce de résistance, which stands several stories high, has no name. But its imposing presence and place in the landscape bumps creative thinking into over drive. Is it a shark fin? An anvil? An alien landing platform?

Who can say? The whole point of this excursion is to let your imagination roam wild. If you're stuck for a name, just follow the kids.

HARDING SPRINGS-COOKSTOVE TRAIL LOOP

Coconino National Forest

Everyone who visits Sedona eventually ends up standing on the rim at world-famous Oak Creek Canyon Vista Point along State Route 89A. The views are breathtaking, that's for sure. However, the combination of crowds, pavement, rails and the requisite viewing scope dilutes the wilderness experience.

Why deal with the masses when there are much more fun ways to peer over this majestic red rock gorge? Solitude can be found on the short-but-steep hiking trails leading up to the rim over Oak Creek Canyon. Although all of these "rim trails" will challenge your stamina, Harding Springs is the least steep, but will still require some respectable physical exertion.

Ascending through dense stands of pines, firs and maples in brisk, switchbacking style, Harding Springs-Cookstove Loop Trail gains 1,200 feet in less than 1 mile, connects with "no-name rim trail," traverses the cliffs above State Route 89A and descends along Cookstove Trail. The effort delivers a rarefied Sedona experience.

Head 0.8 mile uphill on Harding Springs Trail 51. At the top of the trail, a bare wooden post marks a three-way junction. Just before the post, a rock cairn on the left denotes the turnoff for the "no-name rim trail," another cairned route veers left from the post (presumably going to Thomas Point) and the third branch heading straight ahead along a short, rock-lined footpath leads to a very nice scenic overlook. Don't skimp – make this short detour, because there are myriad photo ops to be had here.

Once you're done cheesing for the camera at the overlook, head back to the three-way junction and pick up the "no-name rim trail," heading north. This woodsy, 1.3-mile, mostly flat segment is a challenge to follow. Pay attention and look for cairns among the toppled trees and pine needle litter. Where the path crosses drainages and a seasonal creek, the trail picks up directly across the dips.

There are no signs indicating the start of Cookstove Trail 143. Instead, sporadic cairns mark the way through a quagmire of rotting logs and volcanic rubble. It's not easy to find – but if you get lucky, expect a very steep, 0.75-mile descent. Once at SR 89A, hike 1.3 miles back to the Harding Springs trailhead.

◆

LENGTH: 4.15-mile loop

RATING: difficult – route finding, extreme grades, loose footing

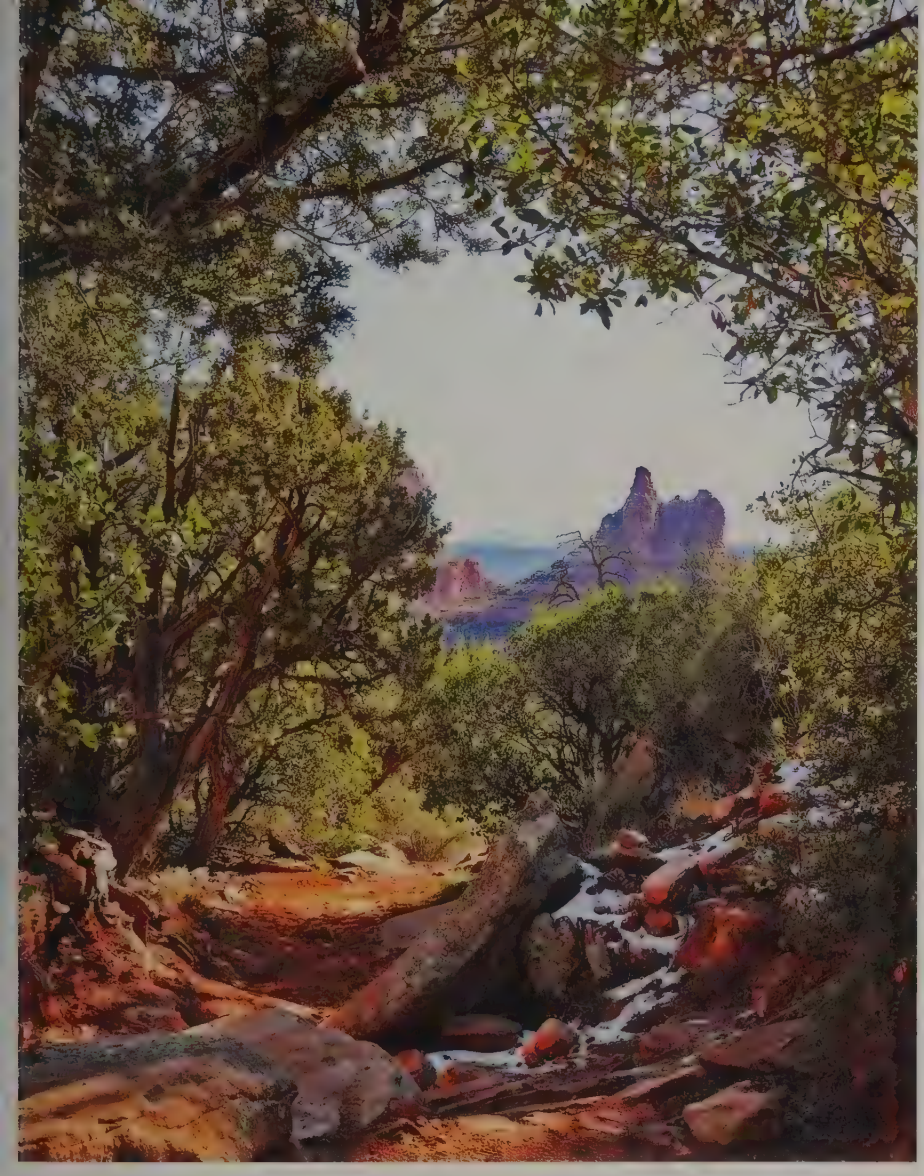
ELEVATION: 5,400-6,800 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

FEE: A Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required. If you want to park in any of the campgrounds along SR 89A, there will be additional fees.

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, veer right (heading northeast) and go 11.5 miles on SR 89A to a parking apron along the side of the road between mileposts 385 and 386. The trail begins across from the Cave Springs Campground at the large Forest Service sign.



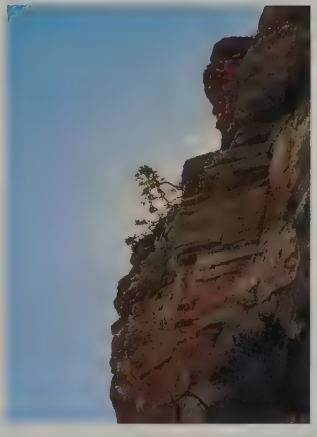
HILINE TRAIL

Coconino National Forest

Beware of the double diamond trail rating. That's mountain bike speak for extremely difficult, and Sedona's new Hiline Trail is most worthy of this designation. Initially created by the biking community, the trail has been recently stabilized and absorbed into the forest service system. Renowned for its edgy-ledgy exposure, slick rock and technical chutes, it's not a trail for novice hikers or those who fear heights. The narrow, serpentine route clings to the vertical face of a north-south running butte serving up a carousel of terrific views including Bell Rock, Cathedral Rock and the mountains surrounding Jerome and Prescott Valley.

At the 1.5-mile point, the trail meets "The Pedestal," a remarkable sandstone outcrop with dizzying vistas and abysmal drop-offs. Beyond The Pedestal, the route becomes even more dodgy, traversing loose rock, tight turns and precariously close-to-the-edge segments on its way to connect with Baldwin Trail, where numerous loop options and (safer) return routes can be planned.

Sego Lily
Blooms: May-August



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LENGTH: 3.2 miles one way

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 4,086-4,646 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

FEE: a Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required

FACILITIES: map kiosk, interpretive signs, pass vending machine

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to exit 298. Head west on State Route 179 and continue to the Back O' Beyond traffic circle near milepost 310. Swing around the circle and go 1.4 miles south on SR 179 to the Yavapai Point trailhead on the right. To reach Hiline Trail, hike less than a mile south on the Shady Slim Trail to the signed junction.

LIME KILN TRAIL to RED ROCK STATE PARK

Coconino National Forest

LENGTH: 2.5 miles one way to the creek or 4.8 miles one way to the park

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 2,880-3,320 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: none, unless you enter the park

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go 9.7 miles west (left toward Cottonwood) on SR 89A to Forest Road 89B (past milepost 365). Turn left and continue 0.1 miles to Deer Pass Trailhead on the right. There are restrooms but no water at the trailhead. Trail begins at the sign in. the parking area behind the restrooms.

For most of its 15-mile course, the Lime Kiln Trail winds through a dusty corridor of crumbling sediments and sparse vegetation. Mountain bikers love the long, flowy route for its epic vistas and clear lines-of-sight that enable speedy traverses of the stark terrain. The trail unwinds as a linear adventure anchored by two water-centric parks with miles of white-rock moonscape in between.

Hikers who are interested in more than big, airy views and chalky flats underfoot should understand that this is a trail that keeps the juicy stuff close to its opposing terminals. Named for a kiln built by the "Willard Boys" back in the 1880s to create lime for mortar used in building projects near Cottonwood, the trail runs between Dead Horse Ranch State Park in Cottonwood and Red Rock State Park in Sedona. From the Cottonwood (west) end, the trail's first mile hangs on ledges above the Verde River and the park's lagoon, passing through a lush riparian area and the historic kiln site before it climbs out onto the desert. On the Sedona (east) side, the trail's last 4.8 miles make for a truly magnificent, underappreciated trek.

From the Deer Pass trailhead located off State Route 89A, the route begins its descent to Oak Creek by way of dirt roads and a mixed bag of topography and vegetation zones. Right out of the gate, the route flanks a track of land across the highway from the Sedona Wetlands Preserve that's irrigated with reclaimed wastewater. A healthy thicket of cottonwood trees hints that the supplemental moisture is benefiting the high-desert flora. Contrary to what you might think, there's no smell.

The next half mile is an easy stroll over a grassy plateau of scant mesquite, yucca and cacti. To the south, the mesa tumbles off into the Oak Creek gorge while views of the Bradshaw Mountains and Verde Valley in the west and Sedona red rock massifs bolster the horizons. Soon, watershed features such as scoured drainages and a series of native stone check dams herald the descent to Dry Creek. This is also where the route intersects the defunct Kachina Trails system – a maze of dirt horse paths that are no longer maintained. To stay on track, follow the basket cairns (rock piles wired into posts) that are placed at all junctions and intermittently throughout the trail. As the path dips off the grasslands and into the Dry Creek chasm, junipers, pinion pines and flowering shrubs form a fragrant fringe.

At the 1.8-mile point, pass a gate and head right on Forest Road 9845. This shared-use road (watch out for ATVs) traces the cliffs above Dry Creek. Although the intermittent stream mostly lives up to its name, residual pools and lacy rivulets remain for days after rain storms. A masonry bridge at the 2.5-mile point marks the major creek crossing. Here, stands of Goodding's willows that blush gold in autumn sprout from the sandy wash.

The fall foliage show usually lasts through mid-November in Sedona's Dry Creek canyons, providing the last vestige of color long after the maple leaf canopies of West Fork of Oak Creek (one of the most popular trails in Sedona for fall foliage-viewing) have gone down for the season. This vivid spot can be a good turnaround point for a moderate 5-mile trip. Otherwise, follow the trail as it heads back uphill and crosses Red Rock Loop Road twice before descending to its terminus near the entrance to Red Rock State Park.

LITTLE HORSE TRAIL to CHICKEN POINT

Coconino National Forest

You'll want to save your camera batteries for the last quarter mile of this hike. That's because the final uphill scramble over slick rock lands hikers on Chicken Point – one of Sedona's most photographed sites. From this rust-red perch, "flyover" perspectives of Sedona's iconic Bell Rock and Courthouse Butte rival those seen from helicopter tours. Located between busy State Route 179 and Munds Mountain Wilderness, this hike straddles the spheres of "been there" and "out there." In addition to views of the keynote landmarks, the Little Horse Trail's soft substrate and simple route ambles among high desert vegetation on its climb to the scenic overlook, where the trail connects with Broken Arrow and Chapel Trails as well as a popular Jeep tour road.

LENGTH: 2.2 miles one way (includes access path)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,280-4,570 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: A Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required. A self-serve kiosk is at the trailhead.

FACILITIES: restroom, map board

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17, take exit 298, head west on State Route 179 and continue to the Little Horse trailhead at milepost 308.9.

MESCAL-LONG CANYON-DEADMAN'S PASS TRAIL LOOP

Coconino National Forest

A relatively new addition to the sanctioned stock of Sedona hiking trails, this one originated as a mountain bike route. As with many wheel-wrangled paths, the Mescal Trail is big on challenging terrain and vertigo-inducing exposure.

Beginning at roughly 1 mile into the trek, the gaping, U-shaped bend on the flanks of Mescal Mountain known as "the bowl" comes into view. Here, the trail seems to disappear into the russet sandstone making the traverse of the cliffs appear impossible. Within a few yards, a wood sign marks a brief section where the trail splits – one side is "difficult," the other "extreme." Pick your poison. Beyond the split, there's another mile and change of semi-queasy ledge hiking before the route rounds the mountain to meet Deadman's Pass Trail at the border of Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness and Boynton Canyon. Straight ahead is the Kachina Woman vortex site – a popular spiritual retreat and platform for musicians who fill the canyons with soulful strains of Native American flutes or didgeridoos.

Mescal Trail ends here; however, a map at the junction shows how to use Deadman's Pass and Long Canyon Trails for an optional loop back to the trailhead.

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LENGTH: 4.8-mile loop

RATING: easy-difficult

ELEVATION: 4,239-4,723 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go 3 miles west on SR 89A (left, toward Cottonwood) to Dry Creek Road (Forest Road 152C), turn right and continue 2.9 miles to Long Canyon Road (Forest Road 152D), turn right and go 0.2 mile to the trailhead on the right. Trail begins across the road. This route can also be accessed via the Long Canyon trailhead 0.3 mile farther up FR152D.

HIKE DIRECTIONS:

Follow Mescal Trail 2.3 miles to Deadman's Pass Trail, turn right (northeast) and hike 0.9 mile to Long Canyon Trail. Turn right (south) and hike 1.6 miles back to the trailhead.

PINE VALLEY RIDGE

Coconino National Forest

Sometimes there are just not enough parking spaces. This is conspicuously expressed at the Bell Rock Pathway trailhead in the Village of Oak Creek. Even though there's room for dozens of vehicles, the lot fills up quickly, especially on weekends and during winter visitor season. That's because it provides access to the Big Park system of trails that includes some of Red Rock Country's most scenic, easy paths around iconic Bell Rock (a famous vortex site) and Courthouse Butte.

If you encounter a packed lot, don't give up on your hiking ambitions – there's another way in, via the Pine Valley Ridge Trail that begins at the Jacks Canyon/Hot Loop Trailhead to the southeast. This relatively new route climbs 440 feet on a rocky backbone, skirting subdivisions and the border of Munds Mountain Wilderness. Although the trail is obvious, it's not marked with signs. The toughest navigation involves finding where the route begins.

LENGTH: 2.4 miles one way to Big Park

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,270-4,710 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17, take exit 298, turn left and go 6.5 miles on State Route 179 to Jacks Canyon Road. Turn right and continue 1.9 miles to the trailhead turnoff (Forest Road 179G) on the right directly across from Canyon Ridge Trail.

From the trailhead gate, where there's a sign for Jacks Canyon 55, hike about 20 feet down the road you entered on (do not pass through the gate) and look for a red dirt single track on the right. Follow this trail 0.1 miles to the gate at Jacks Canyon Road, carefully cross the street, pass through a second gate and begin hiking uphill. At a third gate, turn right and from here, the path is clear although sketchy in some places. Just pay attention and you'll be fine.

At roughly 1.5 miles, beautiful views of the mesas of Jacks Canyon and Sedona's celebrated sandstone formations begin rolling out on all sides. From the high point, the profiles of Cathedral Rock, Capitol Butte and Cockscomb stand out from seldom-seen perspectives. The trail then heads downhill to the junction with the Big Park and Courthouse Butte Loop Trails at the 2.4-mile point. A map sign shows options for joining the wide-eyed masses orbiting Bell Rock, or you can skip the crowds by simply retracing your steps for a mellow 4.8-mile out-and-back hike.

RECTOR CONNECTOR

Munds Mountain Wilderness Area

LENGTH: 3-mile loop

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 4,130-4,411 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: A Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required.

FACILITIES: restrooms

GETTING THERE:

From Phoenix, go north on Interstate 17 to exit 298 (Sedona/Oak Creek). Veer left (west) and follow State Route 179 to just past milepost 307 and turn right into the parking area for Bell Rock Vista Trailhead in Oak Creek.

A new trail has debuted in Red Rock Country amidst a herd of old standards. Lodged in the middle of the Big Park Trails system just north of the Village of Oak Creek, the Rector Connector fills a void in the loop-centric routes that orbit iconic Bell Rock and Courthouse Butte.

For years, trail users who were unhappy that the Coconino National Forest trails went around, but not between, the massive rock formations along State Route 179 had been blazing their own routes, creating unsustainable, dangerous paths that damaged the sensitive environment. In January 2018, Friends of the Forest – a nonprofit Sedona organization that promotes stewardship of area public lands through financial and volunteer labor support – remedied the dilemma by wrangling a former social trail into a system-sanctioned route. Named for Gene and Darl Rector, who have logged thousands of volunteer trail-work hours over more than 20 years, the mile-long path follows a gorge and slick rock passages in the space between the sedimentary stone behemoths.

To find the new connector from the Bell Rock Vista trailhead (see Getting There, left), hike 0.6 miles north to the Courthouse Butte Loop junction. Turn right and go 0.2 miles down the trail to the Rector Connector turnoff. The trail spins away from high-desert savannas and dives into a cypress-and-pine-shaded corridor with steep drop-offs on the west and the hulking form of Courthouse Butte to the east. Roughly halfway, the trail enters Munds Mountain Wilderness and begins a steady ascent on bare rock to an exposed saddle. A wide landing of rounded sandstone at this highpoint gap provides a perfect platform to enjoy views of Horse Mesa to the south and the familiar forms of Thunder Mountain (Capitol Butte), Cathedral Rock and the flat-topped profiles of Wilson Mountain and Brins Mesa in the north.

From this point, the route winds down the smooth north flanks of Bell Rock where basket cairns (rock wired into drum-shaped posts) mark the way among sparse vegetation and stony bends. Where the trail exits the wilderness area, pick up Bell Rock Pathway heading south for a 3-mile loop. Otherwise, consult the forest service map for dozens of add-on opportunities.

SECRET CANYON TRAIL

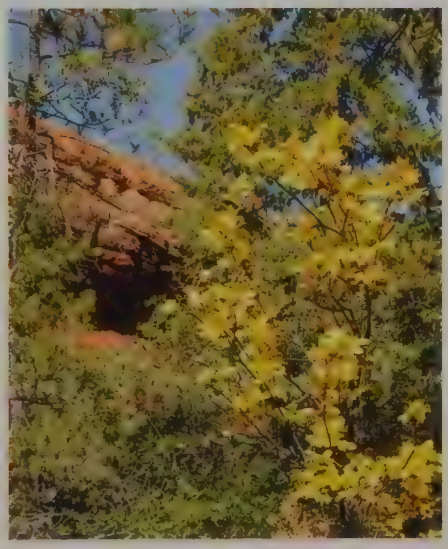
Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness Area

A community of pinion pines, juniper and assorted cacti at the trailhead belie what lies ahead on Secret Canyon Trail 121. Epic views of Sedona's red rock landscape dominate the first 1.75 miles of this hike before the trail makes a sharp westward swerve at the mouth of the canyon.

From here, the route leaves the shadeless chaparral, plunging into a stream bed where spring water runoff and blowing dust have carved sculptures in the sandstone escarpments flanking the path. Pools of water stand at the bases of hungry cottonwoods with heart-shaped leaves. Near the 5-mile point, the trail enters "the narrows," a series of slickrock corridors hemmed in by sandstone, with clusters of maples and oaks bursting from the rubble-strewn canyon floor.

Beyond this point, the trail degrades into a quagmire of scree and undergrowth, which is why most hikers make the narrows their turnaround point. However, those with good route-finding skills can opt to scramble, squeeze and scoot along a sketchy footpath for another half mile.

Arizona Sycamore
Blooms: March-April



LENGTH: 5.5 miles one way

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 4,500-5,100 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go left on 89A for 3.2 miles to Dry Creek Road. Turn right and go 2 miles to Vultee Arch Road (Forest Road 152). Turn right and continue 3.4 miles to the trailhead on the left. FR 152 is very rough; high-clearance and four-wheel-drive vehicles are required.

SEDONA WETLANDS PRESERVE

City of Sedona

Dedicated on September 27, 2013, this lush effluent management area located halfway between Sedona and Cottonwood is a prime destination for wildlife-viewing hikes. Six ponds filled with cleaned and disinfected wastewater are landscaped with native plants to attract myriad waterfowl, songbirds and thirsty critters.

A mile long trail circles the 27-acre site, which features several viewing beaches and cattail-choked coves. The Northern Arizona Audubon Society conducts frequent birdwatching field trips to this spot, but if you're visiting solo, you'll see the most species if you go early or late in the day, move slowly and look for movement at the water's edge.

Silverleaf Nightshade Berries
Blooms: May-October (purple flower)

LENGTH: 1.1-mile perimeter trails

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 3,773-3,978 feet

BEST SEASON: year-round

HOURS: dawn-dusk daily

FACILITIES: restrooms, shaded picnic tables

DOGS: must be leashed and kept out of the water; pack out waste

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go 8 miles west (left, toward Cottonwood) on 89A to the Wastewater Treatment Plant near milepost 366. Turn right, then make an immediate left and continue 0.3 mile to the trailhead.

SEVEN SACRED POOLS: SOLDIER PASS-BRINS MESA-CIBOLA PASS-JORDAN TRAIL LOOP

Coconino National Forest

Blackfoot Daisy
Blooms: March-December

For a short trek, this little loop packs in plenty of variety.

First up is Devil's Kitchen – Arizona's largest sinkhole. Formed by a series of catastrophic geological events, the hole will continue to grow over time and the Arizona Geological Survey considers the area unstable and hazardous. Although it might look tempting, the sinkhole is not safe to explore beyond the trail.

Beyond the slump, head left and hike less than a mile to see the Seven Sacred Pools, a chain of shallow ponds scoured from red sandstone that reflects both blue sky and colorfully layered canyon walls.

Once you're done exploring the pools, follow the trail through a calming landscape of cypress, juniper and yuccas to the sign for Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness. Here, an unsigned but obvious footpath heads right for a mildly steep quarter-mile side trip to the Soldier Pass Arches. Past the arches, the route makes its final ascent to the Brins Mesa Trail junction. At just under 5,000 feet, the views are breathtaking and breath-saving as it's all downhill trekking going forward.

Continuing southeast on the Brins Mesa Trail, the route dives into a canyon land of Paleozoic-age sandstones singed by the 2006 Brins Fire. A haunting landscape of blackened stubble mixed in with healthy high-desert flora splatters the gorges in earthy shades of green. A mid-segment lookout point provides unobstructed vistas of Sedona, and sometimes, graceful waterfalls can be seen washing over distant crags.

From the trailhead, follow the access path 0.2 miles to the first junction and turn left to pick up the Soldier Pass Trail. Hike roughly 0.7 miles to the wilderness sign where an optional side path leads to a series of natural arches (adding .5 miles to the hike).

Continue another 1 mile on Soldier Pass to Brins Mesa Trail. Turn right and hike 2 miles to the Cibola Trail, turn right and go 0.6 miles to Jordan Trail, turn right again and hike 0.3 miles to the Soldier Pass junction, turn left and hike 0.2 miles back to the trailhead.

LENGTH: 5-mile loop (5.5 with arches detour)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,450-4,930 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

HOURS: Soldier Pass trailhead is gated and open from 8 a.m.-6 p.m. daily.

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go west (left, toward Cottonwood) and turn right onto Soldier Pass Road between mileposts 372 and 373. Continue 1.5 miles to Rim Shadows, turn right and go 0.25 mile to the trailhead turnoff on the left.

SUGARLOAF SUMMIT LOOP

Sedona North Urban Trail System, East

Easy to find, simple to climb and boasting one of the best places to savor a sunset, the summit of Sugarloaf is a high point in Sedona's North Urban Trail System. The system is a compact set of loop trails that wiggle around some of Red Rock Country's most iconic rock formations. Coffeepot Rock, Thunder Mountain (aka Capitol Butte) and Chimney Rock all loom large in this hiking hub, tucked among residential neighborhoods north of State Route 89, not far from uptown Sedona.

Although there's a map sign at the trailhead and routes are marked by signs and basket cairns, many informal paths intersect the main trails. Therefore, you'll need to pay attention to stay on course. From the trailhead sign, hike 0.5 miles along the Teacup Trail to a small saddle marked by a basket cairn with a wooden post sticking out of it. To reach the summit, hang a right here and make the quarter-mile climb to the top of Sugarloaf's bald crest. Considering that this hill is hemmed in by much higher and vastly more impressive rock features, views from its apex are surprisingly excellent. In addition to the local geological landmarks, the hazy silhouette of Mingus Mountain soars above the Verde River Valley on the western horizon.

To complete the loop, hike back down to the cairn/post, turn right and follow the (somewhat difficult-to-follow) path back to the trailhead. To extend your hike, visit the forest service web site to learn about connecting trails and other loop options from the Sugarloaf trailhead.

LENGTH: 2.2 miles roundtrip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 4,300-4,900 feet

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE: From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go 2 miles west (left, toward Cottonwood) on 89A to Coffee Pot Drive on the right (located between Soldier Pass Road and Dry Creek Road). Take Coffee Pot 0.5 miles to Sanborn Drive, hang a left, and continue 0.1 miles to Little Elf Drive where a generic "hiker' sign points right. Turn onto Little Elf and follow the signs 0.2 miles to the Sugarloaf Trailhead. Roads are 100 percent paved.

Gordon's Bladderpod
Blooms: February-May

LENGTH: 3 miles round trip

RATING: easy

ELEVATION: 3,300-3,350 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: $7 daily fee per vehicle

GETTING THERE: From the Interstate-17/State Route 260 junction in Camp Verde, go 11 miles west (toward Cottonwood) to Main Street (State Route 89A) and turn left. Continue through Cottonwood on Main, turn right on 10th Street and follow the signs to the park. From the park entrance, follow the main road to Flycatcher Road (second road on the left) where there's a "Tavasci Marsh" sign. Follow this road less than a mile to the signed parking area.

TAVASCI MARSH

Dead Horse Ranch State Park

Situated in the backwaters of the upper Verde River, Tavasci Marsh is a birdwatcher's paradise. Herons, egrets, finches, wrens and flycatchers flourish in the profuse vegetation and aren't shy about spreading their wings. The hike passes through a healthy mesquite bosque – one of the rarest ecosystems in the world – ending at a wooden observation deck with a viewing bench at the edge of the wetlands.

Here, river otters cut through pond water like oiled torpedoes accompanied by a boisterous avian soundtrack.

Sacred Datura
Blooms: April-November

Poison Ivy
Blooms: April-September

TEMPLETON TRAIL

Coconino National Forest

From mid-October through early November, the sycamores and cottonwoods surrounding Oak Creek put on a delicious display of autumn color along Sedona's favorite stream.

The quickest way to get to the water begins at the Cathedral Rock trailhead. From the parking lot, follow a 0.3-mile access path along a mix of constructed rock stairs and slick red sandstone marked by basket cairns to the Cathedral Rock/Templeton junction sign. Straight ahead is an optional 0.4-mile, semi-technical rock scramble leading to two nice vista points. After exploring, head right and follow Templeton, which clings to a rugged, yucca-cluttered slope. After about a half mile, the path swerves for first views of Oak Creek and its flood plains. Here, the route makes an easy but edgy descent to the forested waterway. A kaleidoscope of massive sycamore, cottonwood, alder, sumac, willow, walnut and countless shrubs (beware of poison ivy) glow like beacons among cypress and junipers with a backdrop of rusty cliffs to boot.

Along the next half mile, the trail stays by the water, exposing countless root-tangled coves and shady spots to relax in this high-desert oasis.

LENGTH: 3.4 miles one way

RATING: moderate

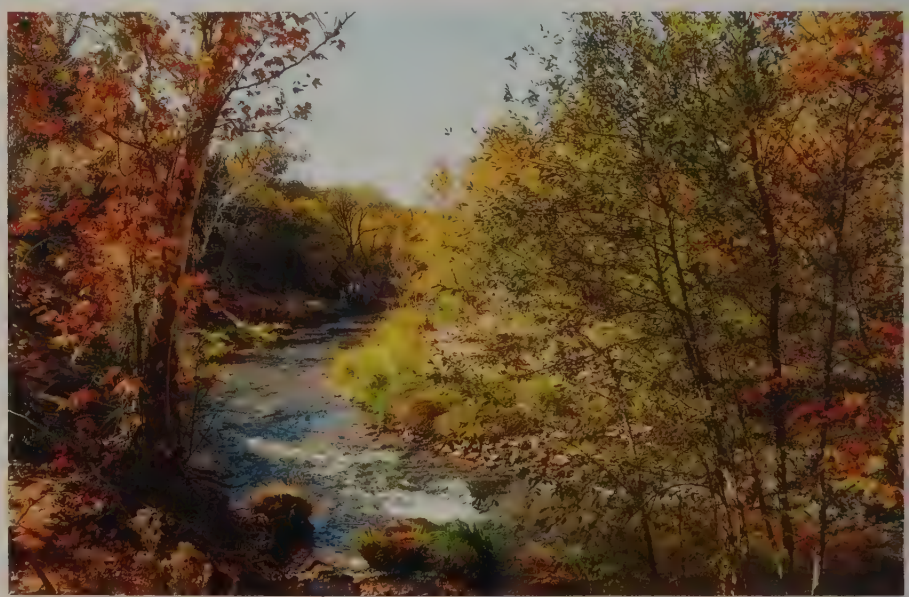
ELEVATION: 3,970-4,330 feet

FEE: A Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required.

BEST SEASON: October-May

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17, take the Sedona-Oak Creek exit 298, go left (west) and follow State Route 179 for 11 miles to Back O' Beyond Road at the traffic circle near milepost 310. Veer left and go 0.6 mile on Back O' Beyond to the Cathedral Rock trailhead on the left.



THOMAS POINT

Coconino National Forest

West Fork, West Fork, West Fork! Like a beleaguered middle sister who covets the attention lavished upon her prettier sibling, Thomas Point Trail suffers in uncelebrated fabulousness. Both routes share Sedona's Call of the Canyon trailhead, so why is one so precious and the other not so much? It's probably because Sedona's dramatic West Fork Trail is the glitter-dusted flying unicorn whereas Thomas Point Trail is more like a pack horse hauling an apple cart. But if you appreciate the kind of trek that holds its treasures in remote, thorny places – this is your trail. Back in the days before the completion of State Route 89A and Interstate 17, the journey between Flagstaff and Sedona was made on ridiculously steep and precarious routes like Thomas Point Trail. The aggressively vertical path is one of four that climb to the top of the east walls of Oak Creek Canyon. The other trails are Telephone, Harding Springs and Cookstove.

Built by the Thomas Family in the 1890s, the trail served as part of a horse and wagon transport network. Today, horses and bikes are not allowed on it, and you'll understand why at about the half-mile point. The foot-traffic-only rule might be one reason why the trail gets little use.

Apple Bud
Blooms: Spring

The route's lung-busting ascent, vertigo-inducing edges and short length are also deterrents. But hold off on the "meh." Whether done in combination with its celebrated big sis or as a solo out-and-back, this is one you'll be happy you did not pass up. The mile-long unrelenting climb begins in a shaded pine-oak forest, but soon curves around a notch in the cliffs to head east along a slim path that's exposed to both the sun and precipitous drop-offs above Oak Creek Canyon. This is not a good choice for acrophobics because there are some spots where the rough-hacked trail kisses the edge.

The steepest parts of the trail pass through a chaparral zone with yucca and cacti clinging to limestone escarpments. Near the top, sharp turns, high-step maneuvers and sketchy segments require some route-finding skills. While watching your step and scratching your head, don't forget to soak up the carousel of vistas that unwind on the way up. Look for views of the coniferous greenery of Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness Area, crimson sandstone strips of Slide Rock State Park and the bristly, high plateau of Harding Point. At trail's end, sightings of Flagstaff's peaks cap off the hike in all its freckled and flawed grandeur.

Spreading Phlox
Blooms: May-August

LENGTH: 2.5 miles round trip

RATING: difficult

ELEVATION: 5,320-6,320 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FEE: $10 daily fee to park

GETTING THERE:

From the traffic circle at State Route 179/89A in Sedona, go 10.5 miles north on SR 89A. Turn left at Call of the Canyon Day Use Area. Parking along SR 89A is restricted and dangerous. Trail begins near the kiosk at the West Fork trailhead. Hike 0.25 mile on the access path, cross SR 89A and pick up the trail marked by a concrete step and signpost.

TURKEY CREEK to HOUSE MOUNTAIN

Coconino National Forest

Ain't no turkeys, ain't no creek – at least most of the time. Yet, for what this trail lacks in terms of running water and wild fowl, it more than makes up for in scenery and geological interest.

The trek starts out on a wide, closed road with numerous unmarked junctions and side paths. To stay on track, be sure to follow the piles of rocks wrapped in wire known as "basket cairns." If you lose your way, just backtrack to the last cairn and to correct your bearings. At roughly the 1.5-mile point, the trail passes Turkey Tank, a tiny cottonwood-ringed oasis. From here, the route begins its gradual climb along a juniper and cypress-shaded path to the rim of House Mountain volcano. On the way up, views of Red Rock country get progressively better with the pièce de résistance occurring on a scenic saddle where views of Sedona, Mingus Mountain and the gaping, eroded volcanic vent collide for an overwhelming carnival of visual delights.

LENGTH: 7 miles out and back

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,000-5,100 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

FEE: A Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required.

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17, take the Sedona-Oak Creek exit 298, go left (west) and follow State Route 179 to Verde Valley School Road – this turnoff (part of a traffic circle) will be on the left, past milepost 306, across from the Jacks Canyon Road sign (the sign is difficult to see). Go west on Verde Valley School 4 miles to Forest Road 9216B where there's a sign for Turkey Creek trailhead. From here, the road degrades from decent dirt to a rut-and-pot-hole riddled mess. However, just before the road turns bad, there's a small parking area for those driving low-slung sedans. Park here and hike another half mile to the signed trailhead. Those with high-clearance vehicles may opt to drive this miserable last half mile to the parking circle.

Common Hoptree
Blooms: May-June

VAN DEREN CABIN

Coconino National Forest

"A woman's bullet kills as quick as a man's!" These menacing words on a lobby card for the 1948 film *Blood on the Moon* spoils one of the movie's several twisted story arcs. Western serial movies don't get any more typical than this one. Starring Robert Mitchum and Barbara Bel Geddes (in her glamourous pre-Miss Ellie of *Dallas* phase) the film's luscious cinematography features several Sedona locations.

Despite the film's period-accurate stilted dialogue, unfortunate stereotypes and marginal production qualities, it's a captivating tale of a sinister businessman versus a good cowboy (and his "spitfire blonde" love interest, the one with the bullets) who foil an evil plot. Sure, there are plenty of horses, cattle and smoking-gun action scenes that play out in the pristine Sedona countryside that dominated the area before Sedona became Sedona. But two things make this celluloid psycho-drama special – Mitchum's noir-ish swagger and vintage silver-screen images of what would become Red Rock Country hiking hubs. Yup, you can hike to two of the film's focal points – Van Deren Cabin and Cathedral Rock.

While many well-known trails, including Templeton and Baldwin, lead to the world-famous spires of Cathedral Rock along Oak Creek, there's only one way to get to the less obvious cabin locale. Constructed in the 1890s, the two-room abode has passed through the hands of various colorful characters, including homesteader and cattleman Earl Van Deren. The cabin's juniper-shaded enclave on a ridge above Dry Creek is a popular 4-by-4 destination for local Jeep tour companies. You could shell out for a butt-bruising ride, but a hike by way of two beautiful trails northwest of town is a less jarring, satisfying experience. Although much of the land surrounding the cabin is private property, the forest service purchased the sliver of territory around the homestead to preserve it as a historic landmark. A plaque at the site gives an overview of its moonshine-steeped history of ranching, outlaws, murder and romance. Some say, a ghost lives there now.

The least congested footpath to the cabin begins at the Long Canyon trailhead. Hike 1.4 miles on the Chuckwagon Trail to the Brins Mesa junction. Follow Brins Mesa 0.1 miles to where it crosses a dirt road. Turn left and hike the road 0.3 miles to the cabin. A corrugated tin roof that spans the building's two rooms and breezeway appears to be the only thing preventing the peeling timbers from collapsing. The homestead's roost above the creek, surrounded by 360-degree mountain vistas, is a Hollywood art director's dream. Although mid-century Tinseltown had a love affair with depicting the Old West through a polished, romantic lens where men wore clean shirts and women were perfectly coiffed, life in the remote cabin could not have been that rosy. Probably the only common thread between the cabin and the forgotten film in dire need of Netflix resurrection is that both Van Deren and Mitchum impressed their women in the end.

LENGTH: 3.6 miles out and back, or backtrack to the junction and follow Chuckwagon for a 5.2-mile loop

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,480-4,680 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go 3 miles west on SR 89A (left, toward Cottonwood) to Dry Creek Road (Forest Road 152C). Turn right and continue 2.9 miles to Long Canyon Road (Forest Road 152D), turn right and go 0.5 mile to the Long Canyon Trailhead on the right.

LENGTH: V-Bar-V: 1 mile round trip; Sacred Mountain: 1mile round trip

RATING: V-Bar-V: easy; Sacred Mountain: moderate

ELEVATION: V-Bar-V: 3,800 feet; Sacred Mountain: 3,800-4,100 feet

BEST SEASON: September-May

HOURS: V-Bar-V ranch is open 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday only. It is closed Thanksgiving and Christmas.

FEE: A Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required.

FACILITIES: restroom, visitor center

GETTING THERE:

V-Bar-V Heritage Site:

From Interstate 17, take the Sedona-Oak Creek exit 298, go right (east) on State Route 179 (Forest Road 618) and continue 2.7 miles to the turnoff. Park in the lot above the ranch. Hike to the visitor center, where you must sign in and meet your guide.

Sacred Mountain:

From V-Bar-V Ranch, go back out onto FR 618, turn right and drive 0.5 mile to FR 9201A. Turn left, follow the dirt road 0.2 mile (or as far as you dare) to a barbed-wire fence and gate. Park at or near the gate.

V-BAR-V HERITAGE SITE & SACRED MOUNTAIN

Coconino National Forest

In terms of both physical presence and historical significance, Sacred Mountain really stands out. A lone white limestone massif jutting from a bowl-like basin surrounded by stark red and black cliffs makes a bold impact on the landscape and holds many secrets of Arizona's native peoples.

The focal point of what archeologists refer to as Sacred Mountain Basin, the 300-foot-high flat-topped mesa, was home to a farming community of Sinagua people between the 12th and 15th centuries. The hilltop living space included dozens of rooms and a central courtyard with big views of what we now call Wet Beaver Creek, Montezuma Well and the Verde Valley. The ruins are highly eroded – however, the crumbling foundations hint at the footprint of the vanished community. Underfoot, pottery shards are plentiful, including some with an unusual, rich black patina.

Archeologists continue to study this area and have determined that the fields below the mountain supported abundant food and fiber crops. Remains of ball courts tell a story of people who not only worked hard, but also liked to play hard. The Sinagua also used sophisticated mathematical and astronomical tools to measure time and seasons, and build accurate solar calendars. Evidence of this can be seen at nearby V-Bar-V Heritage Site, where panels of petroglyphs are believed to document ceremonial traditions, hunting magic and the trajectory of the sun over the horizon.

The best plan for appreciating all the wonders of Sacred Mountain Basin is to begin by visiting V-Bar-V Ranch. Here, exploring the petroglyphs is by guided tour only – the site is kept under lock and key to deter vandals and thieves. Guides are very knowledgeable and can answer most questions about the rock art – remaining questions are easy to research if you purchase one or more of several (reasonably priced) books available at the site visitor center.

Once you've learned about the petroglpyhs and a bit about the Sinagua life ways, head over to Sacred Mountain. At the trailhead, pass the barbed-wire gate (close it behind you) and pick up the footpath that parallels the fence. The rest of the trail is obvious. On the summit, carefully explore at will, being careful to respect the fragile nature of this special place. As with all archeological site, it's illegal (not to mention immoral) to remove or alter anything. Leave the artifacts as you found them and don't climb, sit on or attempt to "reconstruct" the walls.

WEIR TRAIL

Wet Beaver Creek Wilderness Area

Ranking high on any list of fabulous Arizona hikes, Bell Trail is a classic route that follows Wet Beaver Creek through a high-desert canyon. Its red rock formations, running water and swimming holes – not mention its juxtaposition of cactus-studded savanna with lush, streamside greenery – mean you'll have lots of company while hiking this wilderness route. No matter how many times you hike the Bell Trail, it never gets old, but sometimes, a little diversion can freshen up the experience.

That's where Weir Trail comes in.

Weir Trail branches off the Bell Trail at the 2.75-mile point, making a 0.75-mile descent to a concrete dam (the *weir*) and a gauging station. Densely wooded with cottonwoods, sycamores, alders and willows, the creek near the weir is bolstered by rusty sandstone cliffs and sandy beaches.

One advantage of this scenic side trip is that you'll avoid some of the crowds and might have a sandy beach and swimming hole all to yourself.

LENGTH: 7 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 3,760-3,860 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

FACILITIES: restroom

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17, take exit 298, turn right onto Forest Road 618 and continue 2.2 miles to Forest Road 656. where there's a sign for Beaver Creek Work Station and the trailhead. Turn left and go 0.1 mile to the Bell Trail parking lot.

WESTERN GATEWAY TRAILS

Coconino National Forest

Back in the day, a "church key" can opener was a tackle box and backpack staple.

The simple strips of metal, usually embossed with beer brand logos, were used to puncture the lids of pre-flip-top beverage cans. It's been more than 50 years since flat-top metal containers that required a church key opener went extinct with the introduction of pull-tab technology in the mid 1960s, but in many places in Arizona's backcountry, piles of these old-style food and beverage cans mark the locations of defunct ranch and mining encampments. Determining the age and stories behind these sites is best left to professionals who use the distinctive triangular pierce mark of the church key as an index fossil of sorts in the science of can-ology.

Over the years, various antiquity laws designed to protect archeologically-significant resources on public lands have expanded to include objects as young as 50 years old. So, although grandpa's discarded beer cans were once trash, those that survived the elements are now historical artifacts. A few of these rusty relic sites are visible on the Western Gateway Trail System in Sedona. Phase 1 of the proposed 30-mile system of fresh-cut, realigned and adopted user-created trails was completed earlier this year with the help of Flagstaff-based American Conservation Experience trail crews and funding from various organizations. The twisted, interconnected trails wind though the hilly high desert that had been part of the old Girdner Ranch in the area around Dry Creek and its drainages.

Centered around the Girdner Trail, which begins north of State Route 89A near Sedona Cultural Park, several routes are finessed, signed and open for exploration. With fun names like Ledge-N-Airy, Outer Limits, Drano and Roundabout, the singletrack routes offer additional access to a pocket of Coconino National Forest 4 miles west of uptown Sedona.

The new routes spin off from the Girdner and Centennial Trails and may also be accessed from the north at the Fay and Aerie trailheads along Boynton Pass Road. For a moderate 4.6-mile hike, follow the Girdner Trail to the Outer Limits junction, veer left, pick up the Ledge-N-Airy trail and follow the signs to complete a loop. To see some of the rusty can artifacts, go right at the Outer Limits junction and step out on the Roundabout Trail. Within a half-mile, mounds of the now-protected camp litter are scattered among cacti and scrub oaks, dissolving into the red, dusty soil.

As with all heritage sites, please do not disturb or remove anything. If you are tempted to "clean up" the place, consider volunteering with an organization like Natural Restorations (*naturalrestorations.org*) that can teach you how to differentiate trash from treasure and to remove refuge responsibly without disrupting the ecosystem or damaging the relics. Phases II and III of the Western Gateway project are expected to be completed by 2021.

LENGTH: 4.6 miles for the loop described here

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,020-4,440 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 89A/179 traffic circle in Sedona, head 4.2 miles west (left through the circle) on 89A to Cultural Park Way (traffic signal). Turn right and continue 0.3 mile to the Girdner Trailhead on the right. Trailhead has picnic tables and a map kiosk but no restrooms or water.

WICKIUP MESA TRAIL SYSTEM

Lake Montezuma – Rimrock

Just a few miles north of Camp Verde, Wet Beaver Creek cuts a meandering course through high desert plains and sparse mesas en route to the Verde River. For thousands of years, the perennially flowing stream has been the lifeblood for peoples who settled near its green corridor. The communities of Rimrock and Montezuma Lake are the most recent to evolve around the water source.

These tiny towns are a quaint mix of ranch homes, antique shops, cafes and honey stands that sit at the hub of several important heritage sites off Interstate 17. Up until 2018, out-of-town visitors had few reasons to do anything but drive through the creekside hamlets on their way to somewhere else, but a new system of hiking trails now tempts travelers to park and stay awhile. The Wickiup Mesa Trail System, which sits on 700 acres of Coconino National Forest at the far southeast edge of the towns' suburbs, is the result of years of effort by the Beaver Creek Trails Coalition – a volunteer organization dedicated to creating and sustaining trails in the Beaver Creek area in cooperation with the forest service.

The tentacular network of seven trails tethers the communities to Forest Road 618, filling a void between the splashy recreational hot spots in Wet Beaver Creek Wilderness (think: Bell Trail) and the Montezuma Castle-Montezuma Well National Monuments that preserve the legacy of the area's ancient inhabitants. Situated in a landscape of striking contrasts, the trails meander in a place of sprawling flatlands, fractured cliffs and mountain vistas. A strong undertow of earthiness guides visitors through spotty juniper-cedar forests, cactus-dotted grasslands, moist drainages and roughed-up washes on the highlands above the creek's leafy riparian ecosystem.

Anchoring the 6.5-mile network is the Sunset Loop Trail. A hike on this easy-rated circuit is a good way to get to know the area. From the roomy Forestglen trailhead, pass the gate and use the excellent map signs posted at every junction to navigate. Almost immediately, views of Sedona's red rock formations and Flagstaff's San Francisco Peaks appear on the northwest horizon. Hazy silhouettes of mountain peaks near Prescott and Jerome bolster the south and western skylines. Roughly halfway through the loop, the Well Vista Trail leads to a scenic ledge overlooking Montezuma Well and the flood plains of Wet Beaver Creek. Although only the rim of the massive limestone sinkhole that holds over 15 million gallons of water is visible from the ledge, the site is only a short drive away on the road you came in on and makes for a fascinating post-hike side trip.

Beyond the overlook, the loop swings west on a ridge overlooking the mesas and canyons of the wilderness area and V-Bar-V heritage site along Forest Road 618 – another point of interest just a short drive away. Whether hiked alone or in conjunction with visits to the nearby attractions, the Wickiup Mesa Trail System is a sweet addition to the Verde Valley-area recreational menu.

LENGTH: 6.5 miles total for seven trails (4 miles for Sunset Loop-Well Vista circuit)

RATING: easy to moderate

ELEVATION: 3,646-3,791 feet (for the loop)

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From Interstate 17 north of Camp Verde, take the McGuireville exit 293 and veer east (right) onto Beaver Creek Road (County Road 77). Continue 1.8 miles and veer right onto Montezuma Ave. Go 1.3 miles to Cliffside Trail, turn left and follow the winding road 0.9 mile to Geronimo Road, turn right and drive 0.4 miles to Forestglen Road. Turn right and continue 0.3 mile to the trailhead at the intersection of Redrock Road.

WILSON CANYON & JIM THOMPSON TRAILS

Coconino National Forest

Sedona's red rocks are famous for their beauty and soul-soothing qualities. They're also really good at absorbing noise. This is especially apparent on the Jim Thompson and Wilson Canyon trails where russet cliffs soak up the din of nearby uptown Sedona and the bustling recreation sites at the mouth of Oak Creek Canyon.

The well-marked route traces stone ledges high above busy State Route 89A, where a constant stream of cars and trucks can be seen (but not heard) rumbling across Midgley Bridge. Jim Thompson Trail jogs around the massive form of Steamboat Rock through a mix of cypress forests, sandy washes and exposed slick rock. As the trail snakes around vertical rock escarpments, the white limestone cliffs of Wilson Mountain soon come into view. Although there are two popular trails that lead to its summit, the lesser-used Wilson Canyon Trail – which begins at the far east end of the Jim Thompson Trail – explores a deeply wooded gorge below the south face. The slender path makes a mostly easy, half-mile climb among scrub oak, cypress, juniper and occasional patches of cottonwood trees that inhabit moss-embellished, spring-fed enclaves.

To stay on course, look for basket cairns where the trail crosses gullies and drainages. As the trail ascends, the canyon walls converge, echoing the sounds of dripping water and wild birds before the trail appears to end in a dead stop. However, there's a primitive spur path for sure-footed hikers who want to make a short but very steep, 400-foot haul up to a secluded lookout point surrounded by soaring bluffs and whispering mountain breezes.

Feather Dalea
Blooms: February-May

LENGTH: 7 miles round trip

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 4,390-4,920 feet

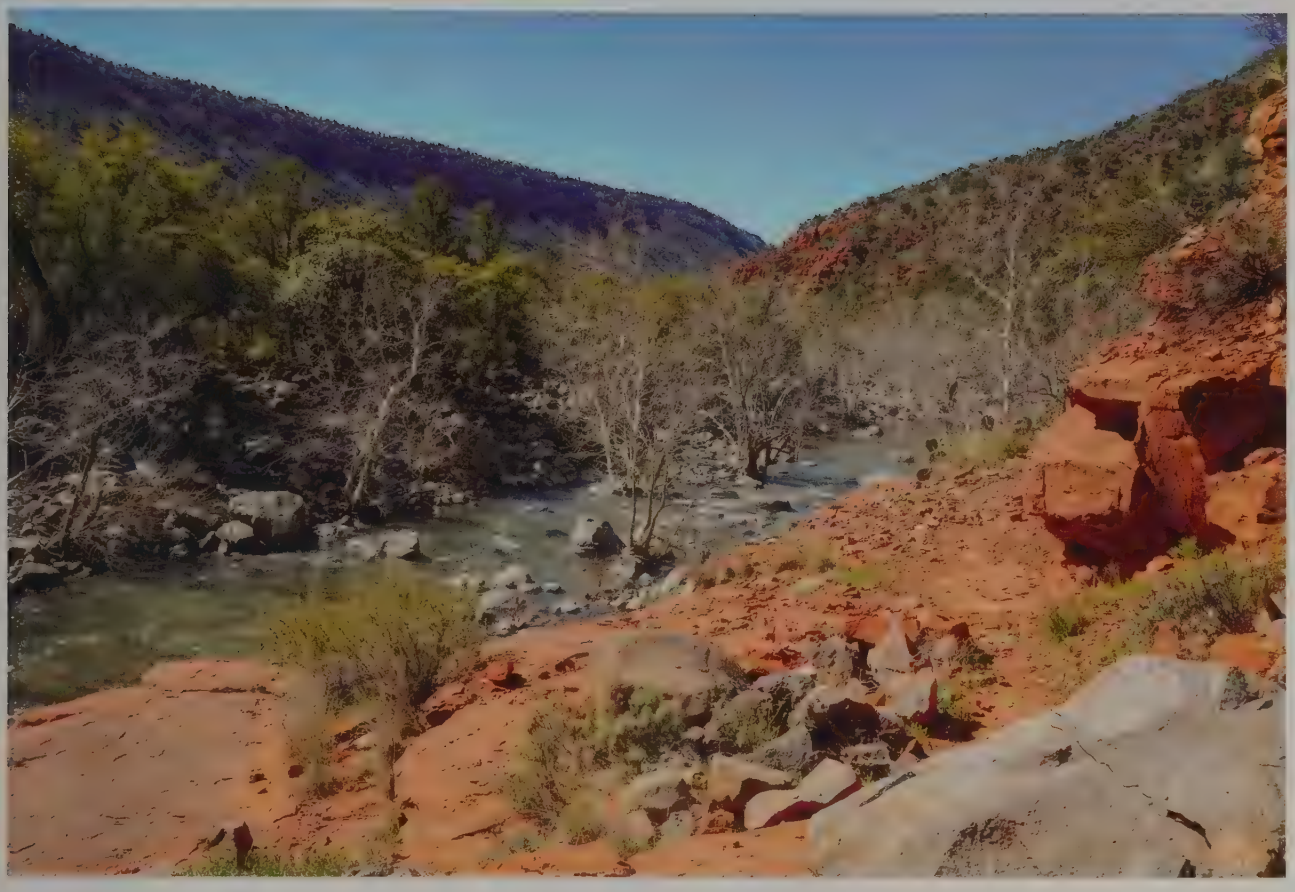
BEST SEASON: October-May

FEE: A Red Rock Pass or equivalent is required.

FACILITIES: restrooms, picnic tables

GETTING THERE:

From the State Route 179/89A traffic circle in Sedona, go right onto 89A, drive 0.3 mile to Jordan Road on the left. Go 0.8 mile on Jordan, turn left onto Park Ridge Dr. and continue 0.5 mile to the Jim Thompson Trailhead on the right. The last half mile is on a gravel road with potholes, but is suitable for all carefully driven vehicles.



WOODS CANYON TRAIL

Munds Mountain Wilderness Area

Following a gorge created by Dry Beaver Creek, Woods Canyon Trail 93 begins with a traipse through Jacks Canyon Riparian Area – a delightfully lush strip of cottonwoods and reeds where you'll need to make a pair of easy creek crossings. Beyond the crossings, the trail encounters a cattle gate and the first of two junctions. Just past the first gate, go right at the sign that warns of extreme conditions in the area. Not to worry, the trail is pretty easy up to the 4-mile point, making for an easy out-and-back day hike in cool weather conditions.

The first mile follows a two-track jeep road through a yucca-studded savanna prowled by resident cattle, but soon dissolves into a sandy-muddy footpath as it delves into the canyon. At 2.1 miles, the junction for Horse Mesa/Hot Loop pops up on a sunny ridge. Here, be sure to turn around for some super sweet views of Mingus and Woodchute Mountains.

Veer right at this junction to continue on Wood Canyon Trail, which will enter the Munds Mountain Wilderness Area in another 0.1 mile. Now, the really good stuff starts to show up. The hike transitions from a flat stroll into a gentle ascent along the cliffs above Dry Beaver Creek. White-barked sycamore trees clutter a creek bed full of gunmetal gray basalt boulders washing up against rusty sandstone escarpments.

The highlight of the hike is "red rock beach," where slabs of brilliant russet rock jut into the creek channel. Beyond the beach, the trail gets sketchy, so many hikers make it their turnaround point.

LENGTH: 5.3 miles one way (trail degrades after 4 miles)

RATING: moderate

ELEVATION: 3,890-4,310 feet

BEST SEASON: October-April

GETTING THERE:

From the Interstate 17 exit 298, go left (west) and continue 8.5 miles on State Route 179 to the turnoff for the Red Rock Ranger District Station on the right. Trailhead is located within the ranger station complex in the south (lower) lot, where a small metal sign indicates the start point.

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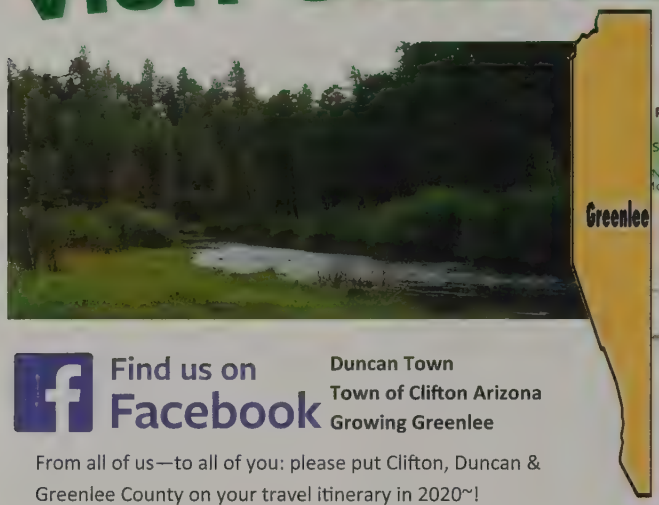

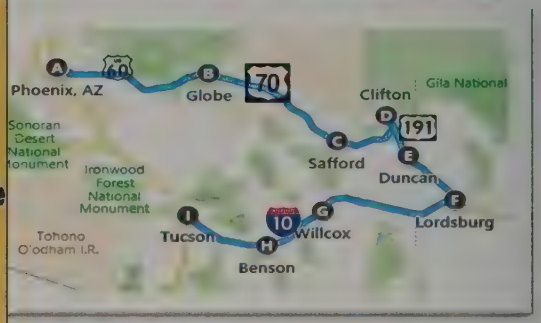

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3.8 MILE
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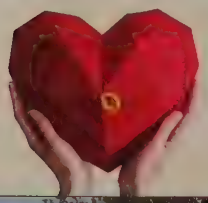

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